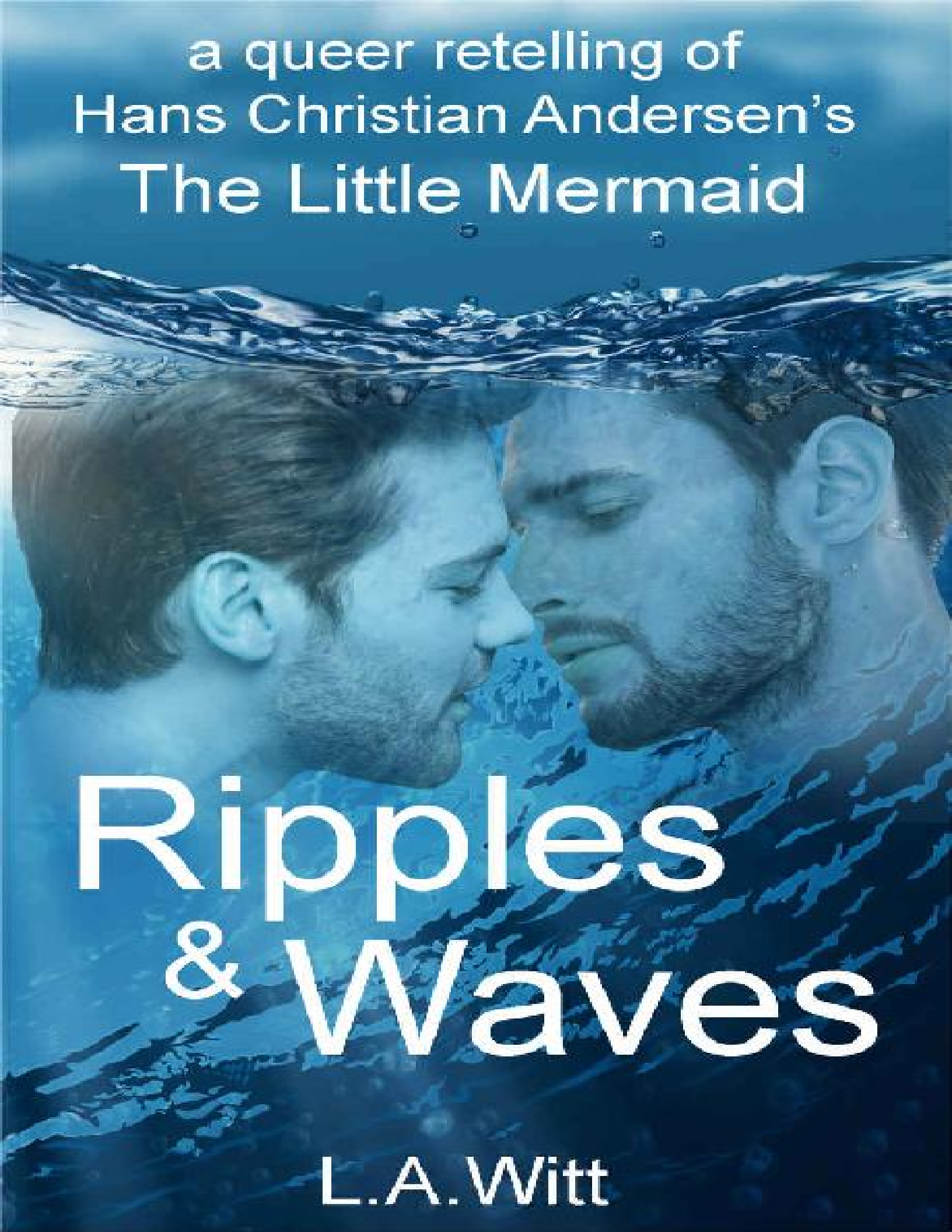
a queer retelling of
Hans Christian Andersen's
The Little Mermaid



# Ripples & Waves

L.A. Witt

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*A Queer Retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Mermaid*

L.A. WITT

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Ripples & Waves: A Queer Retelling of Hans Christian Andersen’s The Little Mermaid

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# ABOUT RIPPLES & WAVES

Colin Everroad should be dead, but after his lobster boat founders during a violent storm off the Maine coast, he wakes up on a beach. He's cold, but unscathed… with strange memories of a face he can't conjure and a voice he doesn't recognize.

No one can explain it, but a friend suggests Colin was saved by one of the mer. Except the mer don't exist. Do they? But… that face. That voice. *Someone* was in the water with him. Someone saved him. If not a mer, then who? And whoever it was, Colin wants to see his face.

Lir broke protocol by rescuing a land person, but he couldn't just let the man drown. When he disobediently resurfaces to see his beautiful land man, he knows it's only a matter of time before he's forbidden to leave the depths again.

One clandestine visit turns into more. Soon, Colin and Lir are meeting at the shore as often as possible, and the connection between them deepens. The only problem is that neither can live in the other's world. Or can they?

Then Lir finds a way for them to be together, but only for a little while… and at a cost. As time grows short, they have to choose: does Lir return to the sea and never see Colin again, or stay forever with the man he loves in a world that will never love them?

*Ripples & Waves is a modern, queer retelling of Hans Christian Andersen's The Little Mermaid*.

# Chapter One

# COLIN

"Sir? Sir?" Something tapped against my cheek. "Can you hear me? Are you all right?" A firm hand shook my shoulder, which made everything hurt from my head to my toes. Well, hurt *more*. My entire body throbbed like one big bruise and ached like I'd been wading in the freezing cold water. That probably meant I was partly numb too. So once that wore off, I'd hurt even more. *Fuuuck.*

"He's breathing, isn't he?" A woman's agitated voice this time. "He's alive?"

"He's alive. Is that ambulance on its way?"

Ambulance? And…on its way where? Where was here? Where the hell was I?

I forced open my burning eyes but then immediately slammed them shut to avoid the blinding sunlight. Groaning, I covered my face with an aching hand.

"Oh!" The woman sounded closer this time. "He's waking up!"

"Sir?" The hand shook my shoulder again, which jostled my entire sore body.

I rubbed my eyes but only succeeded in getting sand in them, not to mention in my mouth. "Damn it," I muttered and turn my head to spit out the sand as I tried to blink out the grit. The ground beneath me was solid, but not—it gave when I shifted, but not enough to collapse under me.

Sand. I was lying on sand.

Wet, cold sand.

What the hell?

When a few tears had finally flushed the sand out of my eyes, I tried again, squinting against the brutal daylight. A middle aged couple were crouched beside me, their faces full of concern, and the woman clutched a cell phone in her hand. They were dressed like tourists—sandals, sunglasses, shorts, and brightly colored T-shirts that I recognized at a glance with their touristy Maine-themed slogans (*Lobstah Time* on his, *Bah Hahbah* on hers).

"Are you okay, son?" The man's hand was still on my shoulder. "Too much to drink last night?" He was obviously trying to make it sound like a joke, but he couldn't hide his concern.

"Yeah, I…" I blinked a few more times, then gingerly pushed myself upright. I didn't really like strangers touching me, but I appreciated his help. My head was throbbing and light, and my muscles felt all rubbery like I'd been swimming in cold water. Wait—*had* I?

In my mind, there was a flash of memory. Icy water. Strong waves. Sure hands keeping a firmer grasp on me than this concerned stranger did now.

A breeze blew past, and on some level, I knew it was warm, but it made me cold all over, especially when it hit my drenched T-shirt and jeans. Shit, *had* I been swimming?

The water's edge was several feet away, the tide lapping lazily at an indentation in the sand beside some drag marks that led to…me. There was sand under my clothes, so had… Had these people dragged me away from the water? And how the fuck had I ended up in the water in the first place? This could've been the hottest day in August—I was pretty sure it was still barely June, though—and the Atlantic off Maine's Downeast coast would still be cold as balls. That was the kind of water kids swam in to prove they were tough. No grown adult in their right mind jumped in that water.

Another flash: not jumping in—*falling* in. Tumbling against something solid, then weightless, then enveloped in salty, violent cold.

I shivered hard, as if I could still feel that cold on top of the chill from being soaked to the bone and dressed in wet clothes.

"Honey, grab him a towel," the man said. "And where the hell is that ambulance?"

I wanted to protest that I didn't need an ambulance, but maybe I did. If I was this disoriented, I might've hit my head or something. And from the parched saltiness in my mouth, I had a feeling I'd swallowed a hell of a lot of water. Was it in my lungs? Was this one of those things where they

pulled a person out of the water, but then their lungs filled up later and they drowned in their own bed?

Yeah, okay, I could live with an ambulance.

"Why don't you take off your shirt, sweetheart?" The woman held up a fluffy blue beach towel. "This will warm you up."

Something warm and dry? Hell yeah.

Hands shaking and arms still rubbery, I started to peel off my shirt but gasped when fiery pain lit up my sides. All the way from my armpits down to just below my ribs, my skin and muscles felt ripped apart.

"What's wrong?" the man asked.

"I…" Couldn't he see? Wasn't there blood dripping down my sides and staining my shirt?

I looked down.

Oh.

No blood.

My faded yellow T-shirt was wet and dirty, and something had torn it, but there was no blood. Or, well, not much. There was a smear that looked like blood, but for all I knew, that was a barbecue sauce stain from when I'd been eating on—

On the boat.

I'd picked up an order of chicken tenders from a place I liked near the Bar Harbor waterfront, and I'd gotten on the boat, and I'd eaten while I'd driven the boat out to empty lobster traps. At some point I'd muttered, *"Damn it,"* because some barbecue sauce had dripped onto my shirt.

*Eh*, I'd thought in the moment. *I'll put some stain remover on it when I get home. No biggie*.

Why did that feel like days ago? And why couldn't I get a solid grasp on anything that had happened between then and now? Between there and here? And seriously, where *was* here? And *when* was *now?* What the hell had happened to me?

"Son?" The man jostled my shoulder gently. "You okay?"

Oh, God, I was the farthest from okay I could remember being, and my memory was too cloudy to be sure if that meant I'd never been this shitty or I just couldn't remember, and realizing *that* didn't help at all.

I swallowed hard, suddenly sure I was about to puke. "Uh…"

"Let's get that shirt off. You'll be a lot warmer in the towel."

Warmer. Towel.

I glanced at his wife. She was still holding the fluffy blue towel, and hell, the pain in my sides made me want to either cry, get sick, or both, but the cold fabric sticking to my skin was suddenly gritty and clammy. With some cursing and some nauseating pain, I managed to peel off the T-shirt and drop it onto the sand with a soggy *splat*. Then the woman wrapped the towel around my shoulders, and I had to fight back a delirious groan. I remembered that I'd always loved the feeling of wrapping myself in a sun-warmed towel after I'd been swimming, but I knew for a fact—scrambled memory be damned—that it had never felt this good. When was the last time my skin had touched anything dry, soft, or warm? Too long ago.

I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward as I pulled the towel tighter around me. I was still cold, my teeth still trying to chatter and my muscles still aching like I'd been in the water too long, but there was warmth now. And this reassuring feeling that while this wasn't over, it probably wasn't going to get worse.

That…feeling was oddly familiar.

Except last time, there hadn't been a towel around my shoulders. I hadn't been on dry land.

*"My name is Lir."*

I jumped as the whisper echoed in my mind. Where the hell had that come from? It was a voice I couldn't place, spoken by a man whose face I couldn't conjure. There'd been chaos and fear and confusion and then… reassurance. Safety. Protection? And…

*"My name is Lir."*

I brought a hand up, paused to dust the sand and grit off my fingers, and rubbed my tired, burning eyes. Okay, whatever had happened between the chicken tenders and my carcass landing on this beach, I must have been out cold and wound up dreaming. Or hallucinating. Was there even a difference?

I tried to grab hold of the images flashing through my mind, but they were quick and slippery. Focusing on one was about as effective as grabbing a minnow with my hand—no matter how quick I was, the best I could get was a handful of nothing.

"Oh, there they are!" the woman exclaimed. "It's about time!"

I lifted my head and blinked against the daylight again. That was when I heard the distinctive rumble of a diesel engine.

“Over here!” Her voice was getting farther away, as if she were jogging to meet the paramedics who’d apparently arrived. “He’s awake!”

Maybe “awake” was being generous, but at least I wasn’t unconscious. I was pretty sure I had been for… for a while. Except it couldn’t have been that long if these people had found me lying in the surf. I was no expert on hypothermia, but I was pretty sure that if I’d been passed out in the water for as long as it *felt* like I had, I should’ve been a hell of a lot more hypothermic than this.

*What on earth happened? And* when *did it happen?*

Footsteps came up behind me. The woman was talking quickly to someone, but I didn’t catch everything she said. Then someone walked around me and squatted in front of me.

He was a round-faced white guy, and he took a breath like he was about to speak.

But then he froze.

And so did I.

That was the thing about small tourist towns like this. The streets may have been teeming with unfamiliar visitors this time of year, but the people who lived here? We all knew each other on sight. If you’d lived here for more than a year or two, you couldn’t go to dinner or goddamned Walmart without running into half a dozen people you knew.

So I guess it wasn’t really a surprise that I recognized the paramedic staring back at me. He was Brad Howard. We’d gone to high school together. We’d sat together in Geometry one semester.

And even if I hadn’t recognized him, he probably would’ve recognized me. *That* was the thing about coming from one of those families with too much money and power— everyone in goddamned Downeast Maine knew who I was.

“Oh my God.” Brad laughed and shook his head as he clapped my shoulder. “Jesus Christ. There are a lot of people who are going to be thrilled when they hear about this.” Then he looked past me. “Hey, Jessica? Put in a call.” His eyes flicked back to me, wide with wonder. “We just found Colin Everroad.”

# Chapter Two

# LIR

From a safe distance away and masked by a little magic for good measure, I watched the land people helping the man to his feet. He was unsteady, leaning hard on the others, but he was awake and upright. None of them seemed panicked over his condition, either.

Good. He'd be all right. I'd worried no one would find him there before the cold got to him, but then the man and woman had stumbled across him, and they'd stayed by his side until the other people arrived.

Satisfied he was safe, I slipped beneath the surface and dove. With a few hard flips of my tail, I was far below the surface and began following the familiar rocks and trenches toward home.

With every dip and turn, I dreaded my arrival. My parents and brothers already disapproved of me going to the surface as often as I did. This time, I'd been gone much longer than usual, and no one would be happy with the reason.

What could I have done, though? The man had been stranded when the storm came in. Something had been wrong with his boat, and he hadn't been able to return to shore before the wind and waves had begun tossing him around. If I'd left him the way merfolk were meant to leave land people who were foolish enough to enter the water, he'd have been dead for sure. Dashed on the rocks by wind. Drowned beneath crashing waves. Even if he could have survived the violence of the storm, the water was too cold for land people.

It wasn't our custom to save them. There was too much danger to us, and the land people knew they were gambling with death when they left dry

land.

But I'd never seen one in danger like that, and I couldn't just let the storm kill him. I'd never imagined I could let anyone, land *or* mer, die if I could save them, and when the moment had come, I'd been right.

*And was that the only reason you saved him?*

Truth was…no.

I'd have saved anyone I'd found in danger, but him? I'd been intrigued by him before the clouds had even begun to gather. Intrigued in ways I still didn't quite understand.

There were those among the mer who thought the land people were ugly creatures with their strange legs and absence of fins and gills. Some thought they were beautiful in their own way, much like we thought sharks and storms were beautiful—something to admire from a distance, but never touch. Certainly not…*touch*.

From time to time, though, someone said the taboo words aloud—that given the chance, they'd couple with an extraordinarily beautiful land person. There were even a few who claimed they had, though Neptune knew exactly *how* someone would go about that. Where would you even put the… Anyway. I had no idea. I'd never thought about a land person like that.

Not until I saw him.

I shivered as I swam on, my mind full of his face and what I'd been able to see of his body. He was one of the lighter skinned people, touched faintly brown the way some of them were if they spent a lot of time in the sun. For the first time in my life, I wished I could see more of a land person. His kind were woefully ill-equipped against the elements, not to mention modest, and like hermit crabs, never ventured out into the light without first wrapping themselves in colorful things.

His face had been easy to see, though. Faintly shadowed with the golden beginnings of the face hair some of his kind wore, with dark eyes I could have stared into for days. I'd swum alongside his craft for a while, watching him from under cover of magic as he sang to himself and emptied lobsters from traps. Even while he'd glanced at the horizon and the dark clouds in the distance, he'd seemed happy and content, smiling when some seabirds flew by, and even offering some food to a gull that had landed on his boat. His smile had mesmerized me.

And then the other boat had arrived, coming up perilously close to his, so I'd gone below to keep from getting caught between them. When it was just his boat again, I'd surfaced, and his smile had been gone just like the other boat. He'd seemed worried. Frantic, even. His boat had gone quiet, and in between throwing progressively more panicked looks toward the blackening horizon, he'd tried—I thought—to fix it.

He'd spoken into something at one point. Calling for help.

"The props are fouled," he'd said into the little box. "They… They got tangled in a lobster line, and—yeah, the props were spinning, and now they're gummed up really bad. And the storm's coming in. I'm… Shit, I think I need the Coast Guard."

The Coast Guard. I knew those words. My father had shown me one of their boats once. Red and white with angular symbols along the hulls. The people manning those boats were land people who existed to rescue others who'd foundered in the water. Good. This man would be safe as long as the Coast Guard came.

Except the Coast Guard never came.

No one did.

I'd done what I could to keep the water around him calm, but what magic I possessed was no match for a storm on the sea. There'd been nothing more I could do but watch as the clouds blotted out the sun and left his boat bobbing in darkness as the waves had begun to roll and crash. And then—

"Where have you been?" Caspian's voice startled me out of my memories, and I veered so hard I nearly crashed into a rock.

I turned, and my brother swam up from below me as I growled, "Is it necessary to sneak up on me like that?"

He rolled his eyes and floated to a stop. "You went to the surface to watch a storm, and after the storm passed, you didn't return." He glared at me and repeated, "Where have you been? Is it true you saved one of them?" He pointed sharply behind us, as if to indicate the land.

I gave an irritated flip of my tailfins and started swimming again. As he fell in beside me, I said, "Someone needed help. I helped him."

Caspian tsked. "I knew it. You're going to get yourself killed one day, you know."

"He would have drowned," I snapped, swimming harder just to make him struggle to keep up with me. Caspian may have been bigger and

stronger, but I would always be faster. Through my teeth, I added, “I made sure he was in a place where his own kind would find him, and then I left.”

“Uh-huh.”

I threw Caspian a glare. “What?”

He didn’t answer. We swam in silence, but I knew this conversation wasn’t over. He was likely waiting until we were home and he’d have our parents and sisters to help outnumber me. They’d all have an opinion about me spending time at the surface, even though I’d never had the same fascination with the land people that other mer had. I just loved storms.

But last night, there’d been a land person stranded in the storm. One who’d had me enthralled with nothing more than his face and his voice and his smile. And I’d saved him from the storm, and now I wanted to see him again, and I’d be forbidden from going near the surface at all if anyone suspected a thing.

Caspian and I were nearly home when he suddenly surged past me and cut me off so abruptly we nearly collided.

“What are—”

“Lir, I need you to listen to me.” He grabbed my shoulders and looked in my eyes. “Are you listening?”

I didn’t want to be, but he wouldn’t let it go until I did, so I glared at him. “All right. What?”

“You can’t save all the land people.” His voice was firm but not as sharp as it usually was whenever I’d returned from the surface. “You can’t save any of them, Lir. *Any* of them. Sometimes they fall into the water, and they drown.”

I set my jaw. “But if I can save one, then why shouldn’t I?”

“Do you think they ever save us?” He arched a brow. “Have you ever known a mer who was saved by a land person?”

I avoided his gaze. “No.”

“That’s because they don’t exist.” He tightened his grip on my shoulders, an unspoken bid for me to look at him again. I didn’t, but he kept talking. “When they find us, they take us to their buildings and study us. In *pieces*. Or they put our dried-out carcasses up for others to look at.”

“So, what?” I returned my narrow-eyed gaze to his. “I should let them drown when they fall into our world?”

“You shouldn’t endanger yourself to save them.” He pointed upward. “And just being near the surface is putting—”

“Yes, yes, I know,” I said with a groan. “Being near the surface puts me in danger of being seen.” I shimmied out of his grasp and swam in a circle just to stay out of his reach. “You think I go anywhere near the top without covering myself in enough magic to stay unseen?”

“I think you take for granted that that’s enough.”

“Are you suggesting the humans have come up with a machine to make it past our magic?” I laughed and started swimming toward home again. “They’re not that smart.”

“Lir.” He growled something, then caught up with me. “Just be cautious, will you? Don’t make me be the one to tell Mother your dried-out carcass is pinned up for them to gawk at.”

“You worry too much.”

“You don’t worry enough!”

Maybe he was right, but my magic and speed had kept me safe enough. They’d also kept the land person safe when his boat had failed during the storm. I’d been careful then—careful to protect myself and the fragile man from the brutal storm. I would never apologize for that.

And I would never tell any of them that, in a moment of foolish hope that he might remember, I’d whispered my name in his ear before I’d left him to be found.

*Please remember my name…*

# Chapter Three

# COLIN

I was pretty sure admitting me for "observation" was overkill and a half. I didn't have a concussion. I hadn't been all that hypothermic. A few bottles of water had helped with the dehydration. There wasn't much wrong with me at this point except being sore all over and wanting to get some sleep, ideally in my own bed.

A somewhat bitchy and not overly charitable part of me thought the insistence on admitting me was because my parents were loaded and it was a chance to bill the crap out of them. After all, I had been whisked from the ER to the VIP suite instead of a perfectly acceptable basic room.

The more realistic and seriously embarrassed side of me was pretty sure this came from the hospital's perfectly justified fear that if I so much as sneezed after I left the premises, they'd be looking down the barrel of one of the Everroad family's famous lawsuits.

Whatever the case, I wasn't staying because I needed to. I was staying because I was an Everroad. And that probably also had something to do with all the news vans I saw parked outside when I peeked out my window. God, please tell me there wouldn't be a press conference. Did it *have* to be big news that I'd washed up on the beach looking like a drowned rat?

At least my dad or his PR guy would handle all the media crap. Dad didn't like me in front of cameras anymore. He hadn't actually *said* it, but ever since I'd come out, he'd always seemed nervous that I might suddenly blurt to the world that *his son* was gay. He was still struggling to stomach it himself. God forbid people started *talking*.

Ugh. I rubbed my eyes and sighed into the stillness of my cool, sterile room. I was tired, I was sore, and I wanted to go home. I was not in the

mood to deal with my dad, his reputation, or his fear that I would tarnish the same. In fact, I'd probably stained the family name by washing up this morning in the first place. Substance abuse was kind of a thing in the soap opera that was my privilege-saturated family, and it didn't take much to imagine the rumors already circulating. Or my father breathing into a paper bag imagining that whatever had happened to me somehow traced back to one of the drug-fueled orgies he was convinced all gay dudes had. Not that he would tell me *where* those things supposedly happened, so I'd never gotten to—

"Oh my God, Colin! You're okay!" My mother's voice startled me, and I looked up just as she rushed to my bed and threw her arms around me. I was stunned for a second but then returned her embrace. Well, I guess that was a silver lining to this whole thing—my mom actually hugged me for once. She was the epitome of a helicopter parent in the sense that she hovered constantly in my life and tried to micromanage me into being a proper Everroad, but she was hands-off when it came to affection.

"I'm fine, Mom." I patted her back awkwardly. "I'm good. I was just a bit cold and dehydrated. That's all."

She pulled back and stared at me with wide eyes. "But we all thought you were dead. They'd given up searching except—" She grimaced and added in a harsh whisper, "They were searching for your *body*, Colin."

I shuddered. I hadn't been dead, and I knew I wasn't dead, but it was creepy as hell to think how easily I could've been and how many people thought I was.

Mom squeezed my arm. "What happened? Where have you been?"

"Dear." Dad appeared beside her and gently tugged her shoulder. "Give the boy a chance to rest. He's probably been through a lot." He studied me, a mix of relief, suspicion, and confusion in his eyes. Like he was glad I was alive, but he had…*questions*.

"I don't remember much." I ignored his flinch and resisted the urge to inform him that I had definitely not been six poppers deep in a twelve-man orgy before getting beached. At least, I didn't think so. Christ, was it too much to ask to remember the good parts? I mean, not that I was into the drugs and stuff, but if I was going to get naked with a bunch of guys the way my dad had apparently convinced himself I would—

I shook myself and cleared my throat. "The last thing I remember is being out on the boat."

Mom nodded. “Joan and Haley got a call from you before the storm started, and they sent the Coast Guard looking for you, but…” Lips tight, Mom gripped my arm so hard it hurt. “When they found Joan and Haley’s boat, but not you, and especially after so much time had gone by…”

I swallowed. “How much time *has* gone by?”

My dad glanced at his watch. “The storm ended a good twelve hours ago. And it lasted for almost as long.”

Twenty-four hours, then. I’d gone out to sea with my chicken tenders, and then I’d been knocked around, half-drowned, and tossed up on a beach, and now I was here. All in the space of twenty-four hours. Why did it feel like so much longer? And why couldn’t I remember anything?

Or, well, I did remember a few things. Everything leading up to the first fat raindrops landing on the deck and the first howling gust of wind—that was all crystal clear. Some of it clearer than I would’ve liked. After that, though? There were just flickers. Flashes of things that didn’t make any sense. Hands. Vague impressions of a face. A voice I’d never heard before or since.

*“My name is Lir.”*

“What happened to the boat, anyway?” My dad pulled me out of my thoughts. “The Coast Guard said the motor was badly damaged in the storm, but they didn’t give a lot of details.”

I avoided his gaze. “It’s… Everything’s kind of fuzzy for some reason, but I remember props getting tangled in a lobster line.” That version was oversimplified by a long shot, but I didn’t want to tell the whole story to my parents, or the Coast Guard, or Joan and Haley, or anyone else. I didn’t want to talk about it. Swallowing past a sour taste in the back of my throat, I said, “Is the boat salvageable?”

My dad nodded. “It took a beating in the storm, and it’ll need some work to be serviceable again.” He paused. “I’m sure we can help the ladies out if they need it.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Okay, that was surprising. Dad didn’t usually have a lot of kind words for Joan or Haley. Joan was a “stale hippie who reeked of stale weed,” Haley was “the missing idiot some village was looking for,” and as a pair, they were “a damn good argument for why marriage should stay between a

man and a woman.” So to say the least, I was surprised he was willing to fix their boat.

“You’d help them?” I cocked my head. “Why?”

A normal person would probably say something to the effect of “it’s the right thing to do” and “they’re screwed without their boat.” Dad wasn’t quite that charitable even under the best of circumstances.

“They *did* sound the alarm for the Coast Guard to go find my son.” His jaw worked, and I swore he was fighting not to wrinkle his nose, especially when he added, “And without that boat, their business will sink too, and this community doesn’t need more welfare leeches.” *There* it was. Shelling out a few hundred bucks to fix the boat’s engine was better than the state paying unemployment for two. And hell, even my dad could grudgingly acknowledge that Joan and Haley had one of the most popular and successful lobster pounds in the Acadia region, which said a lot. Losing them would mean losing a ton of tourist money, and while Dad fancied himself the King of Bar Harbor and Surrounding Counties™, that wouldn’t have nearly the same luster if the whole place crumbled because tourists stopped coming.

That was my dad for you—dig deep enough, and any good deed he did had some kind of self-serving angle. I’d have bet my car he’d even find some way to deduct the repairs from what few taxes he actually paid.

But at the end of the day, Joan and Haley would have their boat back in working order. That wasn’t a gift horse I needed to be looking in the mouth.

Right then, a cute doctor in a lab coat strolled in, a tablet on his arm. “Mr. Everroad?”

I didn’t answer at first, since *Mr. Everroad* usually referred to my father, but after a second, I realized the doc was looking at me. “Hmm? Yeah?”

“Just wanted to give you an update.” He held up the tablet as if any of the words on the screen meant anything. “All your tests came back normal, or close enough to normal that I’d say you’re going to make a quick and full recovery. No fractures. No damage more than a few contusions and abrasions here and there.”

“A few what?” Mom sounded annoyed.

“Bruises and scrapes, basically.” The doctor swiped something on the tablet, skimmed the screen, and met my gaze again. “You’re incredibly lucky, Colin. With the water temperature out there, we see people developing hypothermia in a matter of minutes, even this time of year. If

you were really out there for hours…" Whistling, he shook his head. "I can't explain it, kid. You're just damn lucky."

Mom's fingers were digging into my arm hard enough to leave more *contusions*. "How is that possible, though?" She turned to me. "Are you sure you were in the water? You really don't remember anything?"

An arm around me. *"You can breathe. I promise."* Warmth when everything should've been cold. Calm when there should've been panic. Breathing when I should've been drowning.

The memory was gone almost as quickly as it had come, and I shook myself, wincing at the fresh bolts of pain in my ribs. "What about my sides?" I grimaced. "They hurt like hell."

The doctor shrugged. "We didn't see any damage on the X-rays, so I'm guessing you pulled some muscles while you were swimming or trying to pull yourself up onto something."

"You're *guessing*?" my mother growled.

"Dear," Dad said in that *please don't make a scene again* tone.

"There's really no way to tell for sure," the doctor said. "All I can say with any certainty is that there's no serious damage to bone or soft tissue, so I recommend resting and ibuprofen until the pain eases."

I nodded mutely. I'd pulled those muscles before. Climbing the ropes in gym when I was a kid had left me sore from my armpits to my hips. This didn't feel like that. It didn't feel like overextended muscles. More like… Well, for lack of a better description, more like someone had carved long, deep lines parallel to my ribs. My brain still couldn't process that there were no wounds on my sides and no blood on my clothes because *there should have been.*

*Is that doc* sure *I didn't hit my head? 'Cause it doesn't hurt, but* something *between my ears isn't firing right.*

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My parents left to deal with the press and—I guessed—bask in all the well wishes. Word had gotten around that the Everroads' youngest son had been tragically lost at sea, and then it had gotten around that I'd been miraculously found, alive and well. So of course there'd be people wanting to tell my parents how concerned

they'd been and how relieved they were, because what better way to make sure you were on the Christmas card list of the most influential family in Maine?

Ugh. As much as my dad's homophobia grossed me out, I was secretly kind of glad it would give me an excuse to quietly leave the hospital tomorrow without needing to regale the known universe with my harrowing tale of survival. Especially since I didn't remember half of it, couldn't make sense of the other half, and was seriously too tired to be someone's feel-good miracle story. Just…find someone hot and let him play me in the reenactment or whatever. I'd sign away the rights to my story to anyone who walked through that door, got me the hell out of this hospital, swung into a drive-thru on the way home so I could have something unhealthy, and then deposited me at home so I could nap in peace. Seriously. Any takers? Anyone?

No one came, and the hospital had all but begged me not to sign out AMA and go home. I still wasn't sure what they were concerned about aside from a rapid onset Everroad lawsuit, but whatever. I'd grudgingly stayed and I'd been through all 900 channels on the TV several times, and now I was pretty sure the boredom was going to kill me like the storm hadn't been able to. Maybe this was like *Final Destination*. I was supposed to die in the storm, and since—being the stubborn asshole I was—I didn't, now freak accidents were going to follow me around until I finally cooperated and expired. Freak accidents or extreme boredom.

*Final Destination 11: When Boredom Attacks*.

I laughed at my own thoughts. Yeah, I was definitely getting stir crazy. Which tended to happen when I was exhausted.

"Mr. Everroad?" A nurse poked her head into the room. "You have a couple of visitors." She frowned. "Visiting hours are over, but they're very insistent."

I sat up, adjusting a phonebook-like pillow behind my shoulders. "Who?"

"Joan and—"

"Oh my God, yes. Send them in."

She blinked, but stood aside and waved for someone to come in.

Joan and Haley, my two best friends in the world, hurried into the room, and halted. Joan took one look at me and instantly teared up. Haley put her hand to her face, and I was pretty sure her eyes were getting wet too. And

hell, so were mine. Joan and Haley were the most welcome sight I'd had since this morning if you didn't count the first bottle of water the paramedics had given me. Joan and her familiar short gray hair and those silly lobster earrings that weren't her style at all but she wore because Haley had made them for her. Haley and her thick-rimmed glasses and long black braids and those bright blue eyes that always lit up when we were chatting about stupid shit that made Joan shake her head and groan. I knew the faded hemp leaf T-shirt that Joan was wearing, including that thread on the left sleeve that had started unraveling a while back. I remembered the hike Haley and I had been on in Acadia when she'd ripped her jeans and then come home and turned them into the frayed cutoffs she was wearing now.

I finally had some faith that my brain wasn't completely off the rails because there was so much familiarity standing in front of me. Their faces and their aesthetics were crystal clear, matching up to my memories perfectly… Though the tears in both their eyes weren't something I'd seen very often.

"I didn't believe it when they said they found you alive," Joan whispered as she came closer. "The news said you'd been found, and your dad confirmed it, but…" She put a hand to her chest. "Oh, Jesus, Colin. You scared the hell out of us." She leaned down and hugged me. "We thought you were gone."

"Nope." I laughed despite my throat suddenly getting tight. "You can't get rid of me that easily."

"Thank God."

She let me go, and Haley hugged me too. Then Haley pulled up a chair, and Joan sat on the bed beside my knee. They didn't have to ask. Of course I wanted them to sit down and stay awhile, and I would've been offended if they hadn't known that.

"How are you feeling?" Haley asked.

"Better than I should," I said. "From everything I keep hearing, I should feel a hell of a lot worse than I do now."

"Do you remember anything?" Joan asked. "Your dad said your memory was kind of foggy."

"It is. I remember being out on the boat, and then on the beach this morning. In between…"

Rolling waves. Trying to keep my head above water, but it was already underwater, and that didn't scare me like it should have. Cool fingers on my

cheek. Eyes locked on mine but not a color I could really see. Something soft across my lips.

And…gone. Another fish darting out of a sunbeam, into shadows, out of sight.

“Colin?” Haley cocked her head. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I…” *Keep going somewhere in my mind, and I don’t understand it.*

I flicked my eyes back and forth from Joan to Haley. If there was anyone on the planet I could talk to about this, it was these two. Sometimes I thought the New Agey stuff they bought into was a bit hokey, and they were into all kinds of spiritual and mythological shit that I couldn’t begin to understand, but Joan could be weirdly on-point about things. Like when I’d told her about some weird nonsensical dreams I’d been having last year. She’d said it sounded like I was anxious and afraid of doing something I couldn’t undo. Pretty goddamned accurate, considering I’d been working myself into a panic for months over coming out to my parents. Rightfully so, too, given their reaction.

So whatever kept flickering through my mind since the ocean knocked me around, these two wouldn’t laugh at me or ask what I was smoking, and maybe Joan could even pull it apart and make sense of it.

I picked at the hem of the sheet draped over my legs. “So, can I tell you guys something? About what happened out there?”

They both leaned in.

“Of course,” Joan said. “I thought you couldn’t remember.”

“I… Well, I don’t. Not much, anyway. But there are…” I waved my hand. “I don’t know. There are these little flashes of… I guess memories? It’s almost like I was so out of it, I was dreaming, and I can’t tell the dreams from reality.”

“That happened to me when I had my wisdom teeth out,” Haley said. “When they put me under, I dreamed, and when I came out of it, it felt like I’d really been somewhere else while they’d been working on my mouth.”

“Yeah, exactly. It’s like that. Like I don’t remember the twenty-four hours before I woke up on the beach, but I remember *something*, and it doesn’t make sense. But I can’t get it out of my head.”

“Okay?” Haley inclined her head. “So what *do* you remember?”

I let my eyes lose focus, and tried to conjure up some of those images. None of them would come. Not clearly anyway. It was all abstract now.

Sensation more than sight. Nerve endings tingled with the phantom brush of…something.

Sighing, I shook my head. “It’s like I was dreaming the whole time about being underwater. But I wasn’t cold, and I wasn’t drowning.” I furrowed my brow. “I wasn’t alone, either.”

“Who else was there?” Joan asked softly.

*“My name is Lir.”*

The memory of his words came into sharp focus—something breaking the surface just long enough for me to see before it vanished beneath the waves again, leaving me wondering if I’d imagined it and at the same time absolutely certain I hadn’t.

“I don’t know.” My own voice sounded hollow to my ear. “It wasn’t someone I’d ever seen before. But he was there. With me. It was…” I looked at my friends. “It’s like I spent the whole storm dreaming about some stranger keeping me safe, but underwater.”

Joan and Haley exchanged wide-eyed looks, then faced me again.

I shifted, wincing at the pain in my sides. “I sound insane, don’t I?”

“No, honey.” Joan took my hand, squeezing gently with her familiar rough fingers. “I think you were saved by one of the mer.”

Literally any other time in my life, if someone had suggested that one of the merfolk had done anything—up to and including existing—I would’ve laughed my head off. But the earnestness in Joan’s eyes brought me up short.

I lowered my voice. “Mer? As in…”

“Mermaids,” Haley supplied. “Or mermen. Or…” Her brow furrowed and she turned to Joan. “Is there a word for non-binary merfolk? Oh! Merfolk. Right.”

Joan smiled fondly and patted her wife’s arm. Facing me again, she turned serious. “They’re not myths, sweetheart. They’re real.”

I eyed her, not even trying to hide my dubiousness.

She pursed her lips, then arched an eyebrow. “Okay. Let me ask you this—do your sides hurt?”

The question made me jump, which—appropriately enough—sent fresh pain up and down my sides. “Uh…”

Her smile returned, and this time it was a knowing one with a touch of smugness. “Mmhmm. That’s what I thought.”

I shifted a little and rubbed at my tender ribs. “So, why do they hurt, then?”

“Gills.”

I blinked. “Come again?” I looked at Haley, who was listening intently but didn’t seem at all puzzled. In fact, she shrugged and held my gaze like, *Yeah, Colin. Gills. Obviously.* “You two might have to spell this one out for me.”

“The sides… That’s where the mer have their gills.” Joan gestured up and down her own left side, her finger indicating exactly the area that hurt like hell on me. “A lot of people think they’re in the neck, but…” She shook her head. “All down their sides.”

“Okay, I follow. But.” I gestured emphatically at myself. “Not a mer.” I pointed at my side. “No gills.”

“No gills *now*.” She patted my hand. “But if I had to guess, I’d say your new friend gave you gills temporarily so you could breathe underwater and ride out the storm.”

“How the hell does someone give a person *gills*?” It came out louder than I’d intended, and kind of hysterical, and a nurse walking past shot me a confused look before she continued down the hall. Quieter now, I repeated, “How does he just *give* me gills? Because I’ve never seen that option on PayPal.”

Joan laughed, and Haley smothered a giggle.

“Merfolk have magic,” Haley said. “He probably could’ve turned you full-on mer if he wanted to.”

I stared at her, then looked down at my sheet-covered legs. My memory was cloudy, but I was pretty sure something would have stuck if my legs had ever fused together into a fish tail. Right? Holy shit, had he actually done something to make me one of the mer until the storm was over, and my brain had been sloshed around so much I couldn’t even remember that? What the fuck else was I not remembering?

“Colin. Sweetheart.” Joan squeezed my hand. “Take a deep breath.”

I was taking deep breaths. A lot of them. In rapid succession and—okay, maybe not so deep after all. I forced myself to stop hyperventilating, took a few *actual* deep breaths, and tried to relax against the hard pillows. My heart was racing. My sides hurt. My legs suddenly felt all tingly, like they were both asleep and my skin was crawling, but that was probably my

overactive and overstimulated imagination trying to figure out how all the molecules *might* have moved around to make me into half-fish.

I rubbed my eyes and exhaled. “None of this is going to fit into my brain.”

“It’s a lot to take in.” Joan sounded sympathetic. “But remember that no matter how weird it all sounds, you’re okay now. You’re alive, you’re in one piece, and I’d bet the lobster pound it’s because a mer did whatever they had to do to keep you that way.”

Swallowing hard, I lowered my hand and met her eyes. “You really think that’s what happened? I mean, that stuff… It’s *real*? I thought it was all old wives’ tales.”

“It’s all real,” she said with a slow nod. “Most people don’t believe in it these days because the mer broke away a few generations back and don’t have much to do with us anymore.”

“Why’s that?”

Joan scowled and rolled her eyes. “Because our forefathers figured out things like power and wealth, and the mer got tired of watching us killing ourselves in the name of greed.”

“So, what? The mer are underwater socialists or something?”

She laughed. “No, honey. They’re mer. They just… They do things differently. They’ve never been able to conceive of our need for power and material things.”

“Yep,” Haley said. “And we were turning toxic as a culture, so they swam away and left us to it.”

I grunted softly. “Gotta wonder if they’re onto something.”

“I know, right?” Haley rolled her eyes and huffed. “Take me with you, merfolk!”

I managed to chuckle, but it didn’t last. “So, you guys really think that’s what happened. Some merdude gave me gills and, I don’t know, maybe a damn tail, kept me from getting killed during the storm, and then flung me up on a beach somewhere?”

“Well, it isn’t like he could’ve carried you onshore.” Joan shrugged. “He probably took you as close as he could to where he knew some people would find you.

“And the beach where they found you has pretty deep water,” Haley supplied. “So it makes sense.”

I nodded slowly. “Whoa.” Wiping a hand over my face, I sighed. “I never thought there’d be a time when ‘you had temporary gills and then a merman tossed you onto a beach’ would be the most plausible explanation for… well, anything.”

“Considering how far you were from where the Coast Guard found the boat?” Joan said. “I can’t think of many other plausible explanations.”

“How far away was I?”

“Your distress call came from down near Sutton Island, and that’s pretty close to where the boat was found. When you washed up, you were north of Bar Harbor. That’s a good six or seven miles as the crow flies.”

I exhaled. There was no way I’d swum that far. Not in those conditions. If the storm hadn’t killed me, the hypothermia would have long before I could’ve gone from Sutton Island to north of Bar Harbor. “Why the hell would he take me all the way up there?”

“There’s more people in Bar Harbor,” Haley said. “The merfolk don’t really interact with us much, but I’m sure they know where there’s more boats and stuff.”

Joan nodded. “Exactly.”

I was quiet for a moment, just letting it all sink in. How easily I could have died out there in the icy Atlantic waters. How quickly I’d gone from believing merfolk were myths to accepting that one of them existed enough to pluck my ass out of danger, not to mention give me *freaking gills* so I didn’t drown. How much I wished that, in all the chaos, I’d gotten a better look at his face.

Before I could think twice, I said, “I kind of wish I could see him again.” I paused, then quickly added, “To thank him, I mean. For helping me.” Good save. Was I blushing? Why the hell was I blushing?

“Well.” Joan cocked her head. “Did he tell you his name?”

*“My name is Lir.”*

I swallowed. “Uh. Y-yeah. Yeah, he did.”

“Then it sounds like he wants to see you again.”

“He does?”

“Only one way to find out.” She glanced at the open door, then leaned in and dropped her voice to a whisper. “When you get out of this place, go someplace where the water is deep.”

“How deep?”

She shrugged. “Deep enough the poor guy won’t have to crawl to you. A few feet at least? Maybe more? Anyway, put your hand on the water’s surface.” She held out her hand, palm down and fingers splayed, as if she were resting it on some imaginary water. “And just say his name.”

I blinked. “That’s it?”

Joan nodded.

“Huh.” I quirked a brow at her. “How the hell do you know so much about the mer?”

An odd smile played at her lips. “Remember that story I told you about how I almost drowned when I was a little girl?”

“Yeah…?”

“Did you ever wonder how in the world a child that small fell into water that cold, got swept two miles out to sea, and still made it back on her own?”

“I always figured you’d embellished a bit.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “If anything, I *un*embellished.”

“So, you were… You were saved by one of the mer?”

Her smile broadened, and she nodded. “A pair of them, actually. They kept me afloat until I stopped panicking, showed me how to swim, and then when I got too tired, one let me ride her back all the way to shore.”

“Whoa. Seriously?”

“Mmhmm.” She was practically beaming now. “Over the years, I learned that the mer aren’t prone to helping land people. If we end up in the water, well, we should’ve been more careful. But once in a while, if they’re particularly struck by someone, they’ll help. Always made me feel kind of special, knowing two of the mer cared enough to save me. Though they do tend to take pity on children, so…” She shrugged. Then she patted my forearm. “It’s very rare for them to help an adult. It’s actually kind of taboo, so he must have thought there was a reason to save you.”

“Oh. Wow.” I narrowed my eyes. “Wait, is that story why the lobster pound is mer-themed? And why you called it MerMaine Magic?”

Haley and Joan both burst out laughing.

“What?” Joan didn’t even try for convincing innocence. “You didn’t think it was just a silly pun, did you?”

“Uh, yeah? Yeah, I did?” I rolled my eyes. “Oh my God. MerMaine.”

Haley snickered. “It’s still a good pun even without the origin story.”

“No, it’s not.” I shook my head emphatically. “It’s a terrible pun, and you should both be ashamed of what you brought upon this earth.”

“We’re not,” Joan said dryly.

“Nope.” Haley flashed a toothy grin. “Not even a little.”

“And I’m not surprised,” I muttered. But terrible pun notwithstanding, there was something about the merfolk theme of the lobster pound that drove Joan’s story home, and something about her story that made *my* story seem more real. When I’d taken their boat and my chicken tenders out to sea before the storm, I hadn’t believed the mer existed. Now I legitimately believed that I was alive because they existed, and because one of their own had broken his people’s rules to save me, and now I really, really wanted the chance to see his face. To see Lir’s face. Because that was his name, and I was not going to forget.

If Joan was right, and touching the water and saying the mer’s name really was the best or only way to make contact, then I was bound and determined to remember. Everything in my mind felt slippery right now, memories darting in and out of view like fish between ripples. But that one memory, that voice whispering four words—I stayed focused on it like some shiny object I wanted to retrieve from the sea floor. Something I was afraid to look away from for fear that I wouldn’t find it again.

*“My name is Lir.”*

God, I hoped I’d heard him right.

# Chapter Four

# LIR

My brother and sisters wouldn't let me out of their sight. Everywhere I went—the palace where our family lived, the deep trenches where mer searched for food, the caves and the land people's sunken ship where we often socialized—one of them was there. Not always right on my tail, but never far away.

It was nothing new. My four elder siblings had always watched over me, latching on like barnacles to a whale, which was why I'd become so well-practiced at eluding them. When one or all of them decided I needed their vigilance, I'd let them follow me until I was ready to make my escape. Then I'd simply wait until they were distracted for a moment, and I'd be off and swimming. None of them were fast enough to catch me if I didn't want to be caught, and it had been some years since any of them had tried.

I had always thought that once I reached adulthood, they'd leave me be, but no. Apparently being the youngest—not to mention the smallest—meant I was as vulnerable as a snail without a shell, and they had all made it their sworn duty to *be* that shell regardless of what I had to say about it. Especially whenever I'd been to the surface.

Ignoring my sister Cascade drifting nearby, I swam between the corroded, seaweed-covered chunks of the sunken ship's hull. The mangled vessel was enormous and had been there since long before my time, but today it reminded me a little of the boat the land man had been on. Maybe because they both belonged to land people. Maybe because I suspected that boat was lying somewhere on the ocean floor as well, ready to receive the plants and shell-dwellers that would make it their home.

At least the land man wouldn’t be there, I thought with a cold shudder. This long-sunken ship still had the bones of its crew. I’d broken protocol by saving the land man, but I had no regrets about not letting his bones settle down here with the others.

I shook away that thought, and a moment later, found a couple of friends I’d known since we were children. Arroyo and Darya floated near the ship’s bow, tail fins curved around the bent, seaweed-upholstered railing to keep the current from carrying them away.

“Lir.” Darya smiled as I joined them. “Back from the surface?” Her tone was playful, not acidic like my brother’s had been and my mother’s would be once she confronted me.

“I am.” I held onto the railing with a tail fin like they had. “It was quite a storm.”

“So everyone says.” Arroyo cocked a brow and lowered his voice. “Is it true? You saved a land person?”

I avoided both their gazes. “Yes. It’s true.”

“But why?” Arroyo looked genuinely stunned, which I supposed wasn’t a surprise. “If the other land people had caught you, they—”

“Would’ve dried me out and displayed me, I know.” I groaned. “But… I don’t know. I just couldn’t leave him there to die.”

They exchanged glances, but while they still seemed a bit puzzled by my actions, they shrugged.

“Well, you made it back safely,” Darya said. “I admit, I always worry when you surface.”

I grinned. “It’s not nearly as scary as everyone says. Even if one of the land people sees me, they can’t get near me as quickly as I can vanish, either with magic or by swimming away.”

“You hope,” Darya said. “Just be careful.”

“I’m always careful.”

Arroyo opened his mouth to speak, but then the water beside me moved, signaling the arrival of someone else. I gritted my teeth because somehow I knew who it was even before my two friends stiffened.

When I turned, sure enough—Caspian.

“Is there a reason you’re following me everywhere?” I ground out. “I don’t need—”

“Mother wants to see you.”

I bit down on a groan. Of course she did. She hated my penchant for surfacing, and Caspian had no doubt told her I'd returned after being gone much longer than usual. And about the land man.

Arroyo and Darya mumbled excuses and swam away, leaving me with my brother as their wake nudged at my back. I envied them, and I wanted to swim after them, but when Mother or Father called, I didn't have a choice.

Most mer my age didn't answer to their parents quite like Caspian and I did. Then again, all mer *did* answer to *my* parents—when the Queen summoned you, "no" was not an option.

So with a frustrated noise, I turned to obey the summons, and just because I was irritated and perhaps a *little* petulant over my brother latching onto me like a lamprey, I swam fast so he'd have to work harder to keep up with me.

Before long, we reached the family's palace. We swam between columns and past guards and slipped through corridors carved into the stone and dotted by bright, caged fish whose glow lit up the deep. At the end of a long-memorized main corridor, we reached the great hall where our parents received merfolk with requests for assistance in their daily lives. Our father looked up from listening to a silver-finned mer and scowled when he met my gaze. Mother touched his arm, nodded, and swam away from the twin thrones where they conducted their business.

A few heads turned as Caspian and I followed her out of the hall. Eyes widened, but no one spoke.

In silence, we swam into Mother's chamber with her. In here, the walls were lined with mother-of-pearl like the inside of a shell. With a wave of her hand, the water around us thrummed with magic, and a few large pearls began to glow, reflecting off the walls and illuminating the chamber.

Mother faced us both. Her fins—bronze like her father's, rather than blue like Caspian's, mine, and our father's—flipped sharply with annoyance, and she cut her eyes toward me. "Lir, your brother and sisters have told us they're concerned about you."

"There's no reason to be—"

"You were gone to the surface much longer than usual, and ever since you returned, you've been distracted. You haven't been yourself." She cocked her head, a few dark tendrils of her long hair swaying beside her face. "Why is this?"

I worked my jaw, struggling to hold my mother's gaze.

“He rescued a land man,” Caspian blurted out.

I snapped my head toward him. He kept his eyes focused on our mother, his chin high.

“Is this true, Lir?” Mother asked coolly.

“Yes. He was in danger, and I—”

“And it is not our way to save them,” she snapped. “They know the dangers when they venture into our world.”

“And it’s not *my* way to watch someone die when I can save them,” I threw back.

Her lips thinned. “Did he see you? Did you speak to him?”

It was a struggle to hold her gaze as I said, “The storm was too violent and he was too afraid. I just kept him safe until the waters had calmed, and then left him for other land people to find.”

“And did they?”

I nodded. “As soon as they did, I came back down.”

She eyed me. “What was so special about this land person that you would risk yourself like that? Not to mention giving away to the land people that we exist?”

“They know we exist. They’ve always—”

“They’re forgetting us more and more with each passing generation.” Mother’s fins twitched with irritation. It was a gesture that had warned me since childhood that her patience was nearing its end. “You’re doing your people no favors by keeping us from sliding into their mythology. If they realize we exist, what’s to stop them from hunting us down? They have machines that let them breathe underwater now. If they can ever get past our magic, they could destroy us all.”

Guilt prodded at me. While there was kindness among them, the land people were notoriously cruel and greedy. If they found their way to the mer—if we became more than just myths and faded memories from generations past—then there was no telling what destruction that could bring.

But I hadn’t thought about that in the moment. The man had been doomed to die a violent and terrifying death alone in the icy, churning seas, and I could no more have swum away from him than one of my own kind caught in a net or trapped in shallows.

None of that mattered now, though. Not to my mother, my brother, or the rest of our kind. The secrets of the mer had to be protected, and our

existence had to vanish from the land people's memories and into their myths.

"All I did was keep him safe until the storm was over and leave him in a place where he could be found by his own." I swallowed. "Others have gone to the surface. Even spoken with or *coupled* with land people."

Mother made a face. "And they're a danger to us as well. There are some land people—a handful scattered here and there—who can be trusted, but you couldn't have known this man was one of them."

"There was nothing to trust him with. He never saw me or—"

"But he knew something saved him," Caspian snapped. "If he tells the other land people and they get curious, who's to say they won't come down here and try to hunt us? They've done it before."

My mother nodded slowly. "They have."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Mother didn't tolerate petulance, and I understood she was saying all of this out of genuine fear and concern for me and for our kind. Like no one else except perhaps my father, she had a responsibility to protect the mer, and it was a responsibility she didn't take lightly.

Most mer feared the land people, and from the stories I'd been told since childhood, that fear wasn't without merit. But in my rebellious youth, I'd gotten dangerously close to them for the thrill of it and discovered they weren't so dangerous after all. Most of them, anyhow. And they *were* fascinating.

Still, I couldn't blame my mother or my siblings for their concern.

"Listen," she went on. "There have been fools before you who saved land people or simply encountered them. They told them their names, and when the land people spoke their name by the sea, the mer came, and they never returned." Her expression softened, though her eyes were still unyielding. "I don't want to lose my son to a land person."

"You won't, Mother."

"Good." She studied me, scrutinizing me the way she'd done since I was a child. "Did you tell him your name?"

I dropped my gaze before I could tell myself not to, and my mother groaned.

"You idiot," Caspian growled. "What if he knows how to call to you? What will you do then?"

*Swim with all my might until I see him again.*

But I didn’t dare say those words. “So what if he calls to me? I’m not obligated to go to him.”

“*Will* you go to him?” Mother demanded.

I made myself look in her eyes. “No.”

“Then why give him your name at all?” Caspian glared at me. “What purpose is there if not for him to summon you later?”

“He was frightened. I was trying to calm him.” That much was true—I had spoken to the land man to calm him, but had that been why I’d told him my name? Hardly. “It isn’t as if I told him what to do with my name once he knew it.”

“There are still land people who know,” Mother said tersely. “Who’s to say he isn’t one of them? Or that he won’t speak to someone who is?”

Given the runes painted beneath the water on his boat’s hull, I was *counting* on him either being or knowing a land person who understood what to do with a mer’s name. “That doesn’t mean I have to go to him.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Lir, I will *not* have a son of mine dried out and put on display by the land people.” She pointed a long bronze nail at me and added in a commanding tone, “Stay *away* from the surface. No storms. No land people. Stay down here. Am I understood?”

I set my jaw. “Yes, Mother.”

Inclining her head, she added, “That *includes* if he calls to you. Many mer before you have been called to the surface—and their deaths—by land people who never should have known their names.”

“Understood,” I said quietly.

She waved us away. I swam out of the chamber, Caspian on my fins, and left the palace as quickly as I could for the freedom of the open ocean. As free as anything could be with my brother following. As I glided along with the current, I considered how honest I’d been with my mother. Would I return to the surface? Would I go to the land man if he called my name?

Probably, yes. In fact, I was sure I would. And that if I did return to the surface, either because the land man called me or on my own, I would have to do so discreetly.

Maybe it made me reckless. Maybe it made me an utter fool.

But I hoped and hoped that the land man called my name.

And if he did, Neptune himself couldn’t keep me from the surface.

# Chapter Five

# COLIN

I was liberated from the hospital the next morning. Once they were satisfied I'd eaten and was functioning like a normal human being whose parents wouldn't sue them into oblivion, the staff discharged me. Apparently Dad had to be in Portland for something, and Mom was… I don't know, probably off basking in everyone fawning over her son's miraculous survival. So, they sent Amber, Mom's driver, to get me instead.

Fine. I honestly didn't need Dad grilling me over the circumstances leading up to my scandalous blackout, and Mom would fuss over me until I went outside and threw myself back into the ocean. Some space would do all of us some good.

And some space was the reason I'd moved to their guesthouse a couple of years ago. Still on the property but with some comfortable distance between me and my parents. Our relationship was complicated. My dad and I couldn't exist under the same roof. My mom couldn't stomach the idea of her youngest leaving the nest. Living a few acres away in the guesthouse? The best compromise I could come up with short of getting the hell out of here.

Besides, it wasn't like I could afford it. The general assumption was that anyone who carried the Everroad name was loaded, but my dad insisted on instilling a solid work ethic into all of us by making us work for every penny we earned. Sort of like he'd worked for every penny he had by… being born an Everroad and having a trust fund from my grandfather's fortune. Whatever. The point is, I wasn't rolling in cash the way people assumed I was, and I wasn't exactly working at the MerMaine Lobster

Pound for fun. I mean, it *was* fun, but I was there for the paycheck, because that was my only source of cash, and therefore the only way I was ever leaving this place.

Every time I'd made noise about moving away, Mom had guilted me into staying, and fuck me, but I was still here, at least while I finished school. Two years down, two to go. Then I'd get a job someplace outside of Bar Harbor. Probably as far from New England as I could get. Maybe the *original* England.

I felt bad about it. I was sure my parents loved me in their own way, whatever way that was. But mostly I was one big disappointment after another, and leaving home after graduation would just be one more reason for them to frown and shake their heads. And while they didn't say it out loud, I suspected they were afraid that once I was no longer under any of their roofs, I would abandon the discretion they'd begged me to have, spread my queer wings, and dive headlong into being openly and unapologetically gay. Couldn't really blame them, since that was exactly what I planned to do.

*Two more years,* I reminded myself as I walked past the big house and headed for the guesthouse. *Then it's goodbye, Mom barging in unannounced whenever she feels like it, and hello, Tinder, Grindr, and every other hookup app in existence.*

Two more years.

Ugh.

I let myself into the guesthouse and wandered into the kitchen for something to drink. I wasn't as dehydrated as I'd been yesterday, but I was still thirsty as hell.

As I ran the faucet, I let my gaze drift out the back window.

Right to the water. It was calm today, with no sign that there'd ever been a storm at all, aside from a few small branches wiggling limply in the tide.

*"My name is Lir."*

The cup tumbled out of my hand and into the sink, and I swore. At least it was plastic so it didn't shatter. Grumbling to myself, I shut off the faucet, picked up a hand towel, and cleaned the water I'd splashed all over the sink and counter.

Seriously, when the hell was I going to stop fixating on the fish-dude who'd saved me during the storm? Okay, probably not for a while. He had

saved my life after all. And if Joan was right about why he'd told me his name—assuming I hadn't imagined those whispered words—then maybe he wanted me to call out to him.

And I was curious about him. Really curious.

Oh, who was I kidding? I was going to obsess over this until I at least gave it a try.

I filled the cup halfway, took a few swallows to moisten my parched mouth, and then walked out the back door. At the end of a short path from the guesthouse's porch was a dock that was long enough to accommodate three moderate size boats. There weren't any out here right now, though, except for an old dinghy rocking against the well-worn wood.

It was also mostly hidden from the big house's view, thanks to a rolling hill and a thick row of evergreens. If I wandered out to the dock and spoke the merman's name into the water, no one would see me. If he showed up, no one would see us. If he didn't, well, no one would see me sitting out there like a dumbass, wondering why I'd thought that would actually work.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right?

Heart thumping, I walked out to the end of the dock. It was a floating dock, so the water was only about a foot below the edge. Easy to reach.

With a few grunts of pain, I settled onto my stomach. My sides still hurt where my "gills" had allegedly been, and I had to grit my teeth as I extended one arm out over the water.

As my palm hovered over the surface, my face heated up. This was stupid. There was no way in hell putting my hand in the water and saying someone's name would summon him up out of the ocean or something. Even if it did, who was to say he was anywhere nearby? Did mer, like, migrate or anything? Was he halfway to the Caribbean by now? Would he hear me? And how long was I supposed to wait? Because it would be just my luck he'd hear me, swim as fast as possible, and pop out of the water ten minutes after I gave up and went back in the house. Was there an instruction manual or something?

Hell, there probably was, and Joan probably knew where to find it. I'd have bet money she *had* one.

Well, I didn't have an instruction manual handy, and there was only one way to find out if what Joan said was true.

I touched my palm to the water and flinched. Holy shit, that was cold. Which… Obviously. It was the goddamned Atlantic and this was freaking

Maine, and no matter the time of year, the water was teeth-chattering cold.

*"You're incredibly lucky, Colin,"* I heard the doctor saying. *"With the water temperature out there, we see people developing hypothermia in a matter of minutes, even this time of year."*

I swallowed. I'd survived out there. I'd come out cold and dehydrated, but all things considered, it was like walking away from a catastrophic car wreck with a split lip and a hangnail. Was the idea of touching the water and saying a name to summon a merdude any *less* bizarre than that?

I put my palm on the icy surface again and watched the ripples flutter away from my hand. Then I took a deep breath and said, "Lir."

I immediately felt like a jackass. Yes, something had happened out there, and someone had apparently saved me, but I wasn't going to conjure him up by doing the beach equivalent of saying "Bloody Mary" into a mirror.

As I drew my hand back, more ripples appeared. Then even more as I shook my hand and sent a few drops sprinkling into the lazily rolling surface.

And then…nothing.

The tide kept nudging the dock and trying to push the disembodied tree branch onto the shore. The trees kept swaying in a gentle breeze. A gull kept bitching about something in the distance. Nothing changed.

I sat up and frowned at the water. I'd already felt stupid for going through with this, and now I felt stupid for the heavy disappointment settling in. Had I really thought it would work? Well, yeah. Kinda. Joan didn't peddle in bullshit, and something had happened out there during the storm, so yeah, even if I hadn't wanted to admit it to myself, I'd thought this would work. I'd *hoped* it would.

I stayed there for a moment, absently playing with one of my shoelaces as I gazed out at the water. Well, now what? I supposed I could go make myself some lunch. Maybe make headway on the books I was planning to read this summer while I wasn't going to school. Or just take a nap and—

Something moved beneath the surface. It came closer, a long, lithe form cutting through the water. Coming closer. Coming *up*.

In a matter of seconds, the blurry shape resolved itself into a head and torso.

When he broke the surface, I scrambled back.

Lir stopped.

I stopped.

And we both stared.

I'd never had a good clear look at his face before, but I knew in a heartbeat that it was him. His eyes were slightly larger than a human's would've been, and the irises were a deep green. His skin was a pale shade of gray-blue. Not like a corpse—nothing deathly or unhealthy. In fact it was quite beautiful, especially with the iridescent blue-green fins lining his arms and disappearing beneath the water. His skin color reminded me a little of the clouds that brought gentle rain—silver and full of life.

Like this, his dark hair—ink black with blue and green highlights when the sun hit it just right—was wet and plastered to his neck and shoulders, but I had a flicker of memory of it floating beneath the water and framing his slender face.

Suddenly everything I'd imagined the other night had been real, and he was… he was *here*.

"You said my name." That voice. Oh God. It really was him. *Lir*. "I assume you wanted to see me."

I nodded, unable to speak. Kind of stunned he spoke English, too, but Christ, one mind-blowing thing at a time.

Lir watched me. I watched him.

Finally, I found enough breath to say, "So it's true." I swept my tongue across my lips. "You… You really saved me."

"Yes." He gave a single nod. "I'm glad to see you weren't injured. I was worried."

"Really?"

"Of course." His smile was subtle, almost shy. "I did the best I could to protect you, but there's only so much I can do in a storm."

"Wow. I, uh, I really appreciate it. Thank you." I laughed nervously. "Those gills hurt, by the way." I shot him a playful scowl as I rubbed my side. "Feels like something chewed up my ribs."

He laughed, his smile almost making me forget about the pain from the gills. "I'm sorry they hurt. I knew they would, but the alternative…" He trailed off into a half-shrug.

"You have them too, right?" God, it sounded like such a stupid question once it was out. "Of course you do. You breathe underwater. I…" I shook my head. "I'm sorry. Forget I asked."

“It’s all right. I have them, and for a while, so did you.” He pressed his elbows into the dock and rose out of the water. I craned my neck, and sure enough, all the way down his ribs were gills, each covered by a flap that was the same iridescent blue of his fins. I also caught a glimpse of the way his narrow waist tapered, and smooth skin gave way to glittering scales, but then he eased himself back down before I had a look at his tail.

“I’m sorry they hurt,” he said again as he settled into the water. “I’m told that fades before too long.”

“Good. And don’t get me wrong—I appreciate them! They’re the reason I’m alive. *You’re* the reason I’m alive. I…” I exhaled. “I’m rambling. I’m sorry. And I called you because I guess I just wanted to see you.” I laughed at my own stupid words. “I… I mean, you saved my life. I kind of had a look at your face, but…” I met his eyes, and my pulse went wild. *Not like this*. “This is the first time I’ve really seen you.”

The smile that spread across his lips made my heart speed up. “I can’t quite say the same, but I had hoped to see you again.”

“Did you?”

He nodded. “Especially under less turbulent conditions than before.”

“Oh. Um.” I hesitated, then sat cross-legged as close to the edge as I could get. “I have…*so* many questions.”

“Do you?” Lir hoisted himself up a little and folded his arms on the edge of the dock just inches away from my knees. There were fins along his forearms and down his back, and when he moved his hand, some iridescent blue webbing caught in the sunlight. “What questions?”

I gulped. “Um. Well.” I cleared my throat. “For starters, why did you save me?”

“Should I have let you drown?”

“Well, no. I’m… I really appreciate you *not* letting me drown.” I tilted my head. “But I thought that was forbidden. Saving adults.”

Lir cut his gaze away, and he seemed mildly uncomfortable. “It is. And I don’t have an answer for you, I’m afraid.” He looked up at me again. “Just that I couldn’t let you drown.”

I was speechless. There were people in my life who I couldn’t say for sure would have lifted a finger to pull me out of that water.

But Lir…

Lir couldn’t let me drown.

# Chapter Six

# LIR

From his perch on the edge of the artificial land, the land man studied me.

After a moment, he quietly said, “I mean it, by the way. Thank you. For saving me. I still can’t believe…” He studied me, then gave a soft laugh and shook his head. “I can’t believe any of this, honestly. That I’m alive. That you’re real.” His gaze drifted down to meet mine. “That you’re *here*.”

“You did call to me. So I came.” I just didn’t tell him how much I’d been hoping he would. He might have easily forgotten my name or not known what to do with it. But he’d remembered. And he’d known. And here we were.

As the silence lingered, both of us perhaps unsure what to do or say, I took in the sight of him like I hadn’t been able to during the storm. I had to admit I was quickly growing to understand why some merfolk thought land people were beautiful in ways we were only supposed to see our own kind. He had been mesmerizing from a distance, but up close and without the fear and the storm tossing us around, there were details I hadn’t been able to see before.

Much like mer, land people came in a variety of colors, and this man was on the paler side—slightly pink, a little darker on his face, neck, and shoulders, not to mention beneath the fine golden hair on his forearms. A few tiny, dark spots sprinkled across his nose and cheeks with a few more on his arms and shoulders. I hadn’t noticed them before, but I was intrigued by them now. Or maybe I was just intrigued by him.

His hair was sun-kissed gold, and a little darker along his chin and jaw. He didn’t have one of the enormous bushy beards I’d seen on some land people—just enough to create a shadow along the sides of his face. In ways I never had before and couldn’t begin to understand, I wanted to trace my fingertips along it.

In fact, I wanted to touch him all over. Strangely, I wanted to know what his angles and contours felt like when everything was calm and quiet. When I wasn’t holding on to keep us both from getting thrown onto the rocks.

I’d always thought land people were strange. I mean, it was no wonder they were so useless in the water. Their legs carried them with ease on land, but their feet were useless as fins. They couldn’t get any propulsion, which was why so many wore artificial fins along with their breathing machines when they explored underwater. And even if they could get propulsion, they had no fins on their arms or backs to steady them or help them maneuver, so they were clumsy and imprecise when they swam.

On land, though, I supposed they weren’t so inefficient, and yes, now I could see why some of my kind wanted intimate contact with creatures so different from us. He was hardly the first land person I’d ever seen, but the desire to touch him was strong and startling. I still couldn’t begin to imagine how the bodies of a land person and a mer could go together—how mer before me had coupled with land people—but I could suddenly understand why they’d been compelled to try.

“Well, you obviously remembered my name.” I tilted my head. “I don’t believe you ever told me yours.”

“Oh. Right. Colin. My name’s Colin.”

“Colin. I’ve been wondering.”

“Have… Have you?”

I nodded. “We didn’t really have much time to talk when we met.”

“No, I guess we didn’t.” Colin studied me for a moment. “But you were there. I mean, you must have been nearby when the storm started. I thought merfolk didn’t come to the surface much.”

I was thankful for the semi-opaque water masking the way I curled and uncurled my tailfins. I didn’t need him seeing my sudden nervousness. “We don’t. My family would greatly prefer I didn’t.” I glanced over my shoulder at the calm depths of the cove. “They don’t want me here now.”

“But you come up anyway?”

“Sometimes. I like storms.” *And a particular land person, it would seem*.

Colin tilted his head. “You do?”

“They’re beautiful. Even from down below, just watching the surface get battered around. But from up here…” I gestured around us. “They’re stunning.”

“I can’t argue with that.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I agree. They’re gorgeous.” He laughed softly. “I’d rather not be out on a boat during one, never mind in the water, but if I’m safely on dry land, they’re fun to watch.”

“They are.” And so were land people, it would seem—safer to watch from a distance, but at least in the case of this man, so much more interesting up close. Was I a fool for wanting him even closer?

A memory flashed through my mind of holding him while the storm raged on above us. He’d calmed by then, and we’d gone deep enough to escape the most violent churning, and for a while, we’d just ridden the current, arms around each other and bodies pressed close. In the moment, I’d been fascinated by the way we fit together, his legs brushing my tail while our torsos were pressed tightly against each other. I’d still only thought of keeping him safe, but just holding him like that had roused curiosity I’d never had before, and looking at him now, I couldn’t help myself. That curiosity burned hotter, and if I could have found the words, I might have suggested—

Except, no.

The water was far too cold for a land man, and he’d probably think I was out of my mind. He was a land man. I was mer. Whatever had happened out there, the storm had clearly jostled my head enough to have me thinking these strange thoughts. The least I could do was not speak them aloud and make him back away.

He tilted his head, and I realized neither of us had spoken for some time.

He seemed to realize the same thing, and tensed. Then he quickly said, “So, um…. How did you know I’d figure out how to call you?”

I smiled. “Your boat. The runes on the hull.”

Colin cocked a brow. “Runes? What?”

Chuckling, I said, “I suppose that means you aren’t the one who painted them.”

He shook his head.

“Not many boats have them these days. They’re a ward against evil, and a request for Neptune to keep them afloat and keep the seas calm. Whoever painted them must have been familiar with sea magic, so I hoped they would know how to call to me.” I smiled again. “Seems I was right.”

“Yeah, you were. Joan, the lady who owns the boat, was saved by a couple of mer when she was little. She knows more about mer than I ever have. Like…the fact that you exist.”

I laughed. “We do, yes.”

“I had no idea until very, very recently.”

“Well, we’ve tried to keep our existence a secret from land people.” My humor faded, and I held Colin’s gaze. “The hope has been that in a few generations, we’d fade from living memory into your myths. Maybe this means we’ve succeeded. Or that we did until…”

He studied me. “But why?”

“Land people are dangerous to us. Our people used to trade and interact all the time, but after we realized we couldn’t coexist, we broke away in peace. Now the land people who know about us try to hunt us.”

Colin shuddered. “So then why show me that you’re real?”

I watched him for a moment, wondering how to answer. Finally, I settled on, “I don’t know. I couldn’t let you drown the night of the storm, and then…” I shook my head. “I don’t know. But I wanted to see you again. I wanted you to know who and what I am.” I looked in his beautiful eyes. “Promise me you’ll keep this a secret. Just between us.”

“Of course. Definitely.” He glanced over his shoulder, and when he faced me again, he added, “I know how my own people can be. I’m pretty sure they wouldn’t believe me anyway, but either way, I won’t say anything.”

“Thank you.” I adjusted my arms on the edge of the dock, my skin warm where my elbow nearly brushed his bare knee. I had never imagined needing restraint to keep myself from touching a land person, but there I was, struggling not to inch forward slightly to make that brush of skin happen. What was wrong with me? And why had it been wrong with me ever since the night of the storm?

Gazing up at Colin, I had to wonder if the sea witch could have as much power over someone as he had over me simply by existing.

*And if anyone from below saw us like this…*

The thought quickly sobered me. I swallowed, fighting the urge to glance back into the water behind me. “I, um… I probably shouldn’t stay long. If anyone notices I’m gone…”

Colin’s shoulders drooped a little. “Oh.” Then he glanced over his shoulder and frowned. “I guess I should too.”

Disappointment made the water around me seem colder. *Did* I have to leave now? *Couldn’t* I stay up here in the sun for a little while longer?

“Listen, um…” Colin pulled his lower lip between his teeth. “Before you go…”

I gazed up at him. “Hmm?”

He hesitated, then looked in my eyes. “I don’t suppose it would be too much to ask for you to come back?”

My heart fluttered, though I tried not to let my excitement show in my face or my voice. “Do… Do you *want* me to come back?”

“I do, yeah.” He swept his tongue across those adorable pink lips. “As, um… As often as possible, actually.”

Whatever my heart was doing just now, it had never done it before. “Me too. It’s… It can be difficult to get away, but I’ll do my best. If you call to me and I don’t come, don’t give up on me.”

Colin nodded. “Okay. And if you’re here, leave a shell or something on the end of the dock.” He motioned at the house beside him. “I’ll see it from the window, and then come down here and call out to you.”

“All right.” I smiled. “I’ll see you soon.”

He smiled back. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

We held each other’s gazes, and I had the strange urge to reach out and touch his hand or his leg, as if I needed to feel him and be sure he was still real. The silence lingered and the air was taut as if there was something left to say, but I was sure if either of us spoke again, we’d be here long past sundown. If I wanted my absence to go unnoticed—or at lease to not rouse *too* much suspicion—I couldn’t stay here too long.

“Soon,” I said again, and then I let go of the dock and arched back into the water. I didn’t dare steal a glance over my shoulder—I’d be too tempted

to stay after all—and, with a few hard flips of my tailfins, I was on my way out of the cove.

My heart thundered as I swam. No one could know of this. No one could even suspect. Whenever I left the sea to come to the surface, I'd have to carefully escape my family's scrutiny. They'd never understand where I was going or why. In fact, they'd be enraged if they found out why, and I supposed I'd have felt the same if Caspian or one of our sisters had done this.

No matter. Being the youngest of five, not to mention the fastest by far, I'd long ago become adept at giving my family the slip. As long as I could escape notice and swim up here without being followed, then I could see Colin again. Maybe not as often as I'd like, but I could see him.

And maybe it made me an utter fool, but all the risk and deception?

It seemed worth it to look into those stunning dark eyes again.

# Chapter Seven

# COLIN

I legitimately expected our "we'll totally do this again" to be like when people run into each other and swear they'll get together soon, but they never do. Or like when you swap contact info with your seatmate on a plane after an interesting conversation, and you both know damn well that will be the last time you ever communicate.

So I was more than a little surprised to get home from the lobster pound the next day and see an oyster shell sitting on the end of the dock.

I hadn't kept him waiting too long, though, had I? Shit, the longer I stood here being shocked about it, the more time he had to give up and head back to wherever it was merfolk lived.

Without another thought, I hurried outside. I tucked the oyster shell into my pocket, then touched the water's surface and said, way more confidently than I had yesterday, "Lir."

Okay. Done. So…how long was *I* supposed to wait now? A few minutes? An hour? Shame we couldn't text and—

The water rippled, and a second later, his shape came into view. I gasped, my jaw falling open. Why was I so surprised that he was real? I'd seen him yesterday, for God's sake. In the flesh. Or scales. Or whatever. I'd *seen* him.

But for some reason, the sight of him breaking the calm surface, water streaming off his silvery skin and blue fins and black hair…

On second thought, maybe that wasn't disbelief. Maybe that was more like "seriously, someone please tell me how a dude and a mer can screw," which made me wonder again if I'd hit my head harder than I thought the other day. Or wasn't there some psychological thing where people fell in

love with someone who rescued them? Was that it? Except I wasn't in love with him. I just thought he was seriously hot.

And I was kind of staring.

I cleared my throat. "Hey. Hi. Um." I swallowed. "You came back."

He folded his arms on the edge of the dock and looked up at me. "I thought you wanted me to."

"I did. I… Yeah, definitely." I laughed nervously. "Just, um, I guess I wasn't expecting to…" Christ, I sounded like an idiot. "Anyway. It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise."

"So, um." I swallowed. "How far do you have to swim to get here? I mean, I'm assuming you don't just live in the middle of the harbor."

He laughed, which gave me butterflies because apparently my brain had forgotten we were technically not even the same species, but whatever. "Our city is closer to the open sea. It's a long swim, but fortunately…" He grinned. "I'm fast."

"So, what? After you leave the shell, you go home and wait—"

"No, no. I leave the shell, and then swim around outside the cove." He gestured in that general direction. "If I didn't hear you call to me, and had to return, then I'd have tried again tomorrow."

Really? He came all this way, and he'd come back tomorrow if I wasn't here? Shit. I couldn't even get guys to return my texts.

"Wow. Well, if I'm ever not here, I probably just got hung up at work."

"Hung up at work?"

"Yeah. I work at a lobster pound." Beat. Right. He wouldn't know what the was. "It's a, um, a restaurant. Where people come to eat lobster."

"What do you do there?"

And we just kept talking. About what I did at MerMaine Magic. About the times he and his siblings had trolled fishermen by putting things like seaweed and discarded trash on their hooks and in their traps. We talked, and talked, and talked, and before I knew it, the sun was starting to get low.

Lir frowned at the sky. "I should go back. Before there's no more light."

"Right. Yeah." I was disappointed, but didn't let it show. "It was good to see you again."

"Definitely likewise." He paused. "Should I come back after this?"

"Do you want to?"

We locked eyes.

My pulse was racing for some reason. Was I worried about sounding desperate? Or clingy? Well, nothing ventured… “I do want to see you again.”

His features relaxed. “Me too.”

“So, just, um…” I took the oyster shell from earlier out of my pocket. “Leave another one, I guess?”

Lir’s smile was going to be the death of me. No two ways about it. “I will. And soon.”

“Good. I’m looking forward to it.”

We held each other’s gazes a moment longer, and then he arched back into the water, giving me the briefest glimpse of his shimmering tail before he disappeared beneath the surface.

For a while, I just sat there, watching the waves he’d created fade into ripples, which eventually faded into the usual lazy roll of the surf.

He *was* real. Right?

Finally, I shook myself, got up, stole one last look at the cove’s calm water, and then headed inside. On my way up the dock, I realized I was still holding the oyster shell he’d left to let me know he was in the area. I debated tossing it back in the water—I’d outgrown collecting seashells by second grade—but I couldn’t quite bring myself to do it.

Maybe that made me stupidly sentimental. Whatever. Aside from the fact that I was still alive, this was the only tangible thing I had from knowing Lir.

So I went inside, rinsed off the shell, and set it on the counter beneath the window.

And hopefully tomorrow, there would be another.

---

After that, Lir and I couldn’t stay away from each other. If we’d lived in the same world, I had no doubt we’d have been joined at the hip by now, but the best we could do was meet by the dock whenever we could.

That turned out to be surprisingly often, and for surprisingly longer and longer periods.

As promised, if he was nearby, Lir would leave a seashell on the end of the dock, and I'd call to him just like I had the first time. If there was no shell, but I had time, I'd call out and see what happened. Sometimes he came. Sometimes he didn't. It was a little disappointing if I didn't see him for a day or two, but we never let much time lapse between our visits.

I usually worked at the lobster pound in the late afternoons and evenings, so I'd come to the dock in the morning. If I had the day off, then I could be down here for hours on end, which Lir didn't seem to mind any more than I did. Once we both showed up, we'd stay out there for hours sometimes, telling each other stories about our lives and the wildly different worlds we lived in.

Mer spoke English, but generations in wildly different worlds had left a few gaps in our respective vocabularies. It made sense. He understood things like doors, windows, floors, and ceilings, but cars, phones, and email were foreign to him, so I sometimes had to stop and give him context. Sometimes I'd get lost when he described how the mer navigated or some of the senses he had—like being able to feel when a storm was coming without even surfacing, or being able to read the body language of sea life the way I could interpret a cat or a dog's behavior.

Whenever I wasn't with him, I was tucking stories into the back of my mind to tell him next time I saw him. His laughter was as addictive as it was infectious, and I couldn't help scouring my memories and the world around me for literally anything that would amuse him. Like the time a tourist held a lobster too close to her face for a photo after stupidly taking the bands off its claws and wound up getting her ear pinched. Or when I went whale-watching a few years ago and a couple of bougie idiots got upset when the whale spouted by the boat and coated them in whale snot.

I listened intently as he told me about the time he and his sister had fallen in with a pod of humpback whales and followed them. They'd been so enthralled with the whale songs, they'd realized a little too late that the pod was migrating, and they were much farther from home than they'd intended.

"By the time we swam back," he said with a groan, "I thought my tailfins were going to fall off."

Another day, he'd been fascinated by my story of hiking through the forests out by Sugarloaf Mountain and encountering a bull moose. The moose was, as they frequently are in Maine, skittish as hell, and he'd taken

off after just a few seconds, but it had been long enough for me to be utterly stunned by how fucking huge the damn thing was. As I'd told Lir the story, I'd finally given up on trying to describe the creature and instead took the lazy man's way out: showing him a video on my phone.

Of course that had opened up a whole new world—Lir had never seen a smartphone before, and I spent a solid afternoon introducing him to the existence of things like cat videos. He'd known about cats—he sometimes saw them sunning themselves on piers or wandering on beaches—but hadn't realized just how entertaining they were. That would probably be my legacy, then. I was the man who'd revealed to the mer that humans not only domesticated cats, we entertained ourselves and each other by videoing their ridiculous antics and posting them online. I suppose there were worse ways to leave one's mark.

"Do mer have pets?" I asked one day.

"Some do. My brother tamed an eel for a while, and it followed him everywhere until it lost interest and went back to its rocks." He paused. "We do use fish for light sometimes."

"Light?"

Lir nodded. "Some of the fish in the deeper parts of the sea, where it's darker—they glow."

"Oh! Right. Bioluminescence."

He blinked. "Huh?"

"Bioluminescence." I waved a hand. "It's… That's what our scientists call it when fish light up."

"Oh, I see. Well, we gather them and use them to light up the darker tunnels and chambers in our homes. For the larger chambers, there's magic, but the fish do fine for the smaller spaces."

I blinked. "Magic? That's a thing?" I paused. "I mean, it exists?"

"Of course." He seemed confused for a moment, but then understanding seemed to dawn. "Oh. Right. The people who came to this land a few centuries ago were afraid of magic."

"Afraid of—okay, I mean, I know there were people who freaked out about witches and stuff, but…none of that was real. Was it?"

"Of course it was." He shrugged. "I'm sure it's all been forgotten after a few generations, but land people knew magic as well as we did from the beginning of time."

"Wow. The things they don't teach in history class."

“What?”

I shook my head. “Never mind. But yeah, I’d say you’re right about magic being forgotten. Everyone pretty much agrees it doesn’t exist.”

He barked a laugh. “Maybe they can’t figure out how to use it, but I assure you, it exists.”

“And you use it for light.”

He gestured past me at the house. “Your buildings have light in them. Where does that come from?”

“Electricity. Uh, machines. They…” Damn, I really should’ve studied more in science class. “I don’t know how they do it, but it’s science. Machines and all that.”

He looked dubious. “No magic at all?”

“Not… Not that I know of, no.”

“What a shame. I can’t imagine life without magic in it.”

*And why is it getting harder to imagine life without* you *in it?*

One particular afternoon, we’d been out here so long my back had started to ache from lying on my stomach. Sometimes I sat up, but that always gave me a crick in my neck, so I usually just stretched out flat on my belly and rested my chin on my folded arms. It made it easier for us to talk, and it brought me down so close I could really see his hypnotic blue-green eyes. It was just as well I sometimes needed him to explain things to me—it was a lot easier than saying, *“Could you repeat that? Because I was staring into your eyes like a dork.”*

And it didn’t help that he was nearly always looking right back at me. Whenever he did, it never failed to make my spine prickle and my toes curl. I couldn’t explain it—there was just something so intense and beautiful about him, and knowing I had his full attention was heady stuff.

The stiffness in my back and shoulders was starting to get to me, so I arched my back to relieve a crick and was rewarded with a loud pop.

Lir’s eyes widened. “What was that?”

“My back.” I gestured over my shoulder. “Just been sitting still a while. It’s okay.”

“We *have* been out here a long time.”

“We have. You’re, um, not in a rush to leave, are you?”

Lir smiled that smile that I saw in my dreams. “Not at all.”

“Are you sure?”

“I have nowhere else I’d rather be than here, if that’s what you mean.”

*Oh my God, why aren't there any dudes this sweet on* land*?*

"But when you come to see me…" I studied him. "I mean, I'm not keeping you away from anyone, am I?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. A partner? Friends?"

"I see my friends when I'm down below. By 'partner,' do you mean…"

"Like, a lover or something?"

Lir shook his head. "No, I don't have anyone now. There's no one keeping me from coming to the surface."

"Oh. Out of, um, curiosity, how does that work with mer, anyway? Do you *have* partners?"

"We sometimes marry, same as land people. That's mostly for those who want children. Otherwise, we'll stay together as couples or three or four."

"Three or four? Really?"

"Sometimes. One has always been enough for me, but my eldest sister has been with her two lovers for as long a I can remember."

"And they don't get jealous of each other?"

"Of course not." He eyed me as if I'd just asked a ridiculous question. Maybe for the mer it *was* a ridiculous question. "They both love her and each other. What is there to be jealous of?"

"Huh. We're… Land people, we have this…" I tried to figure out the most concise way to explain it. "Everyone's expected to have one person. Forever. Ideally not of the same sex."

Confusion creased his forehead.

"Men with women. Women with men." I sighed and shook my head. "People…get weird about men with men and women with women."

"That seems like a strange thing to, as you say, get weird about." Lir shrugged. "I've had lovers who were men and lovers who were women. I can't imagine anyone being bothered by it."

My heart fluttered. "You've had male lovers?"

"Of course."

I blinked.

Lir cocked his head. "So that really is true? That land people think it's strange for men to couple with men and—well, for anyone?"

"Very," I said with a nod. "And it's not weird for mer?"

“No, not at all. No one cares as long as everyone involved is in agreement.”

“Oh, *man*.” I groaned. “Your world sounds *amazing*.”

“Yours sounds…” He pursed his lips as if he were trying to find the word. Maybe one that wasn’t impolite.

“Fucked up? Backwards? Hung up on stupid crap?” I waved a hand. “Pretty much any of those fit.”

He laughed. “Well, I wasn’t going to be quite so blunt, but it does sound like an odd place. Come to think of it, I think that was one of the reason the mer broke away from the land people.”

“Was it?”

Lir nodded. “The land people spent so much time fighting amongst themselves, murdering each other and tormenting each other over things that didn’t make sense to us. It seemed safest to stay away before they found a reason to turn on us.”

“Yeah, I can see why your people came to that conclusion. As someone who lives up here, I can testify—it’s exhausting.”

He grimaced. “That’s what I’ve always imagined.”

“What about you, though? I mean, people accept you being with whoever you want. Do you have someone?” Beat. “Wait. Shit. You already told me that. Sorry.”

An odd smile played at his lips. “I probably won’t find someone while I’m spending most of my time with a land person, but I can’t say I mind.”

My heart quickened, and I held his gaze. “I don’t mind either. Just, you know, if you’re staying away too much, and you don’t—”

“I’m not. I promise.” He glanced past me and scowled. “I should leave for now, though. While there’s light.”

“Of course. Yeah. I’ll, um, see you soon?”

Lir’s smile came fully to life. “I’ll see you soon.”

And then he was gone again, the water rippling away from the place where he’d gone under, and the cove was still, silent, and empty except for me.

Every time he swam away and I trudged back to the guesthouse, I caught myself wishing there was some way to cross the divide between us, and that feeling was especially pronounced tonight after we’d talked about how jarringly different his people and mine were from each other. I hadn’t felt this close to someone in ages, and at the same time, it was like we were

literally worlds apart. We could talk, and maybe we could even flirt, but neither of us could breathe in the other's world. Or, well, not very long in his case, not at all in mine. And even if I kept my head above water, I'd be hypothermic if I got into the water with him. If he came up on land for more than a few minutes, especially as hot as it was this summer, his tail and fins would dry out.

But damn, a boy could dream.

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"Son of a bitch!" I put the coffeepot down as I shook out my other hand, sending a few drips flying. I'd been drinking coffee since I was like thirteen and always managed to get it in the cup without incident, but this was the third time this week I'd splashed some on my hand.

Grumbling to myself, I shoved my hand under the faucet and let cold water run on it for a few seconds. I didn't even have to ask why I was this distracted. I knew *exactly* why.

I was, as always, daydreaming about Lir. Ever since I'd met him, I'd come to understand what people meant when they said they were so caught up in someone that they missed their own driveways or poured salt into their coffee.

After I'd cleaned up the spilled drops, I carefully finished pouring my coffee. Then I added a little milk and hoped I could drink it without wearing it this time.

The back door swung open, and I nearly spat out my coffee.

"Mom. Jesus." I put the cup down and glared at her. "Could you knock?"

She shrugged flippantly. "I don't need to knock to come into my own house."

"Yeah, but what if I was in my underwear or something?"

"Well." She offered a tight, frosty smile. "Make sure you have clothes on."

I rolled my eyes. "Fine. But if you walk in on me giving some guy a blowjob on the couch, then—"

"*Colin!*" she snapped. "Don't you *dare*."

There was a part of me that desperately wanted to throw back a defiant, *“Or what?”* It was silenced, however, by the part that was well aware that *“Or what?”* in this scenario included me being out on my ass and begging Joan and Haley to let me sleep on their couch for a while.

It wasn’t like I could tell her to stay out. Even if the guesthouse was “mine,” my parents still owned it. They were letting me live here when they could just as easily send me packing. My father had joked when we were kids that “checkout time is eighteen,” but I couldn’t be completely sure he was joking about us leaving when he was ready, regardless of whether we were. Especially now that he was tapping his watch and itching to be an empty nester. The only thing keeping him from booting me out of the nest was my mom’s inability to face life with all three of her kids grown up and gone.

God, I needed to save some cash and get the hell out of here.

On the bright side, having Lir monopolize my free time had made it a lot easier to save money. I wasn’t spending much these days except on food and gas. Maybe I’d be out of here sooner than later after all.

Oblivious to me, Mom opened a cabinet and scanned over its contents. As she moved to the next one, I sighed and wiped a hand over my face.

“Mom, would you—”

“Honey, when was the last time you went grocery shopping? I’ll have Graciela pick up more food for you, because this isn’t nearly enough, so I’m going to—”

“It’s *fine*.” I tried not to growl it. She meant well. She really did.

“No, you need—”

“What I *need* is a little space and privacy?”

“Why?” Mom slammed the cabinet shut, spun around, and glared at me. “So you can bring *men* here?”

I sighed. “Is it really such a big deal? I mean, would you be upset if you walked in on me with a woman?”

“I’d be relieved.”

I rolled my eyes. “So you don’t actually care if I’m happy? You just want me straight.”

“I think you’re letting all of this nonsense in the media and on the internet go to your head. You need to grow up, find a nice young woman, and settle down properly. You have a name to—”

“What about settling down with a nice young man?”

Mom huffed.

I inclined my head. “What if the choice is between me settling down with a nice young man or having nonstop one night stands with women?”

“That is *not* a choice. Grow up, Colin.”

There was no point in arguing with her, and I knew it. I only did it because I was stubborn and because there was some part of me that thought my mom might eventually have an epiphany and realize a queer son wasn’t the worst thing in the world. But now I was tired, and anyway, I needed to get going soon.

“Okay, I really have to go to work.”

She scowled. “Why do you insist on working at that trashy place? You know your dad has jobs available at—”

“We would *never* be able to work together.”

“But he’d pay you much more than those women ever could. You can do better than handing out…” She wrinkled her nose. “Handing out paper towels and butter sauce to *tourists*.”

“And when I’m done with school, I definitely will do something else.” *And I will do it far,* far *away from here*. Keeping my tone even, I said, “We can talk about this later, but I really have to go.”

“Fine.” She huffed and headed out of the kitchen. “But we’re not done discussing this.”

The door slammed shut before I could respond. Not that I’d really planned to. What could I say? Mom and I had been butting heads forever, and it wasn’t going to end any time soon. Dad wanted me to move out. Mom wanted me to stay here but work for Dad. Neither approved of my “lifestyle.” I was fucking miserable, the only one who was going to do anything about that was me, and I wouldn’t accomplish it by arguing with my parents who’d made up their minds to reject me and anything I did.

All I could do was save up some money, finish my degree, and run like hell until I found someplace far enough away.

*But what about Lir?*

I shook that thought away and started collecting my keys, wallet, and a travel mug of coffee so I could head to work. It would be at least two years before I found my way out of Bar Harbor. I could figure things out with Lir farther down the line.

For now, I needed to work on that whole saving up some money thing.

So, off to the lobster pound.

"Hon, you're someplace else today." Joan arched a gray eyebrow. "In fact, ever since that storm, you've been distant. What's going on?"

I sat back and sighed. "It's the guy who saved me. The mer."

"What about him?" Then, understanding seemed to dawn, and her eyes widened as her spine straightened. "You called out to him, didn't you?"

I nodded. "And I've seen him almost every day since."

"Oh, so you've made friends with him."

Made friends? Why did that seem insultingly oversimplified? All Lir and I had done was talk, and "friends" technically was the right term for it, but it grated like a badly mispronounced word.

"I…" Exhaling, I let my shoulders slump as I wiped a hand over my face. "God, Joan. I feel so ridiculous, but I think…" I lifted my gaze and met hers. "I think I've got, like, *feelings* for this guy."

On some level, I expected her to wrinkle her nose and suggest that being attracted to a mer was halfway to being attracted to a fish. Or maybe cuff me upside the head, tell me to come back to earth, and suggest I get on Tinder like a normal person and find an actual land-dwelling person to sleep with.

But instead, a knowing smile came to life. "Falling for your merman hero? That's adorable."

I didn't need to check a reflective surface to know my face was brighter than a boiled lobster. "Yeah, yeah, yeah." I sighed and leaned against the counter. "Except there's no point, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, why the hell do I have to feel this way for someone I can't have?"

"Oh. Honey." She patted my hand. "Half the art and literature—not to mention popular music—we have out there is because someone wanted who they couldn't have."

"Yeah, but at least they were pining after the same species." I huffed a breath. "It's literally impossible for me to be with Lir because he can't breathe on land for more than a few minutes and I'd either drown or die of hypothermia in water."

Joan seemed to consider it, then shrugged. “Still a better love story than *Twilight*.”

I snorted, and she laughed, giving my shoulder a pat.

“Well, if he keeps coming back to the surface to see you, then something about it must be mutual.”

“You think so?”

“Well, yeah. With as much as the mer avoid humans as a rule? You bet.”

I drummed my fingers on the counter. “So what do I do?”

“Who says you have to do anything? Maybe you can’t have a physical relationship with him, or live together, or whatever, but what you can do sounds like it’s special to both of you.”

I nodded slowly and whispered, “Yeah. It is.”

“Right. So I say you keep doing that. Enjoy it for what it is and what it can be instead of feeling bad about what it *can’t* be.”

I chewed on what she’d said, and finally replied, “That makes a lot of sense. I’ll do that.”

“Good.” She squeezed my shoulder. “Now help Haley clear off some tables. The lunch rush is going to start soon.”

I saluted her playfully and got up to grab some plates and paper towels.

I had no idea what this thing with Lir was or how long it would last. For all I knew, the cold, dark days of a Maine winter would chase me indoors and him below the surface. But there was still time before the weather started turning.

So if what we had now was all the time and contact we’d ever get, then I intended to enjoy every second of what it was.

And I’d try like hell not to think about what came after.

# Chapter Eight

# LIR

I'd left the shell on the dock a while ago but still hadn't heard from Colin. Maybe he wasn't coming today. He'd said there would be days when he couldn't get home until very late.

I swam past the entrance of the cove again, twisting and rolling just to amuse myself.

He wasn't coming today. I should head back and—

"*Lir.*"

I couldn't hear his voice saying my name. The water just…vibrated with it somehow.

I didn't hesitate. As soon as I felt him call me, I turned in the direction of the cove and swam as fast as I could.

As soon as I broke the surface and saw his face, I smiled. Whatever consequences awaited me if someone caught me coming up here to see a land man, they were always worth it the instant I laid eyes on Colin.

I rested my hands on the edge of the dock.

Colin smiled as he sat down. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"Never."

*You're always worth waiting for*.

"Does your family mind you coming up here all the time?"

I shrugged. "They would prefer I didn't, so I just try to slip away without them knowing I've gone or where I'm going."

"Okay, I guess that makes sense." He furrowed his brow. "And if you weren't coming up here, I mean… What *do* merfolk do? From day to day, I mean?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you have jobs? Work? Or…” He shook his head. “What’s a day in the life of a mer?”

“Some of us have jobs. Most of us take turns gathering food for everyone. Some are sentries outside the palace, and—”

“*Palace*?” His eyes widened. “There’s a palace?”

I laughed. “Well, yes. We have a king and a queen. That’s where they live.”

“Oh. Huh. My friend had told me mer weren’t into power like humans are.”

“Power?” I shook my head. “No, our king and queen aren’t like what I’ve heard land people’s kings and queens are. They maintain order. Assign jobs when they’re needed. Keep us safe.”

“So they don’t… I don’t know, rule? Like, order everyone around?”

“They have authority,” I said. “But that’s only because they have the responsibility to make decisions. If mer decide they don’t like how a king or queen rules, they’ll be told so, and if they continue to behave like greedy tyrants, they’ll be sent out into the open sea and replaced.”

“It’s that easy?”

I shrugged. “There are two of them and scores of us. What can they do to stop us?”

“Oh. Huh. I hadn’t thought of that.”

I considered telling him I was the son of the king and queen, but…no. He was the only person I’d ever met who didn’t know I was part of the royal family, and I enjoyed just being two men who talked and spent time together. Other mer hardly trembled in my presence, but they were always cautious around me in a way they weren’t around each other. As if they were afraid that saying or doing the wrong thing would mean bad things for their families. We had, after all, had some tyrant rulers before my parents, and though they’d been out of power for generations, that kind of fear ran deep.

I didn’t want that with Colin. I just wanted to be Lir in his eyes. Nothing more. Nothing less.

As we always did, we lost ourselves in conversation, and as I always did, I lost myself in gazing at him. From the start, I’d assumed there would come a time when seeing his face wouldn’t give me a little thrill. When the newness would fade, and I wouldn’t be excited to see him anymore.

That day might still come, but it hadn’t yet.

Today, as always, the first look at him had been as amazing as the first glance of the land blanketed in snow at the start of every winter. Beautiful. Striking. Something I just wanted to gaze at until my eyes were tired.

That was exactly why I kept coming back despite the risk. Whenever I could steal away without raising suspicion, I swam for the surface. Sometimes I’d double back or loiter beside some mer haunts like caves and shipwrecks, just to be absolutely certain I hadn’t been followed. Then I’d continue toward the cove where Colin lived.

If it would be some time before I saw him, I’d drift over toward the harbor town. Bar Harbor, Colin had said. Here, there were boats all over the water, and the shore was teeming with people. I’d always thought it was so strange how there would be times when Bar Harbor was crowded both on and off the land, and other times when the place seemed almost deserted. It was the colder times when the people seemed to disappear, which I never understood because the land was so beautiful when it was covered in snow. And other towns along the coast weren’t so dramatically different from one season to the next.

Colin had told me during one of our visits that the swell of people was because of “tourists”—land people who came from other places to enjoy the scenery and eat lobster. His job apparently depended on those tourists. Once the season ended and they were gone, he’d work elsewhere until the seasons changed again.

The days grew hotter as the summer wore on. Normally I’d stay away from the surface when the heat set in, but that meant staying away from Colin. I could bear the heat if it meant spending more hours with my beautiful human friend.

Today, clouds had gathered and the air was thick even as rain fell. It wasn’t stormy like the night we’d met, just a lazy rain and a hot breeze. Colin’s gray T-shirt was soaked and had turned blacker than the sky, but he didn’t seem to mind the rainwater drenching his hair and trickling down the sides of his face. He lay on his belly on the end of the dock, chin resting on his folded arms, and we talked as droplets landed on and around us.

Seeing him like this made our conversation harder to follow. I was too fascinated by a drop rolling down his temple, or the way another was suspended for a few heartbeats at the corner of his jaw on a single whisker of his short beard. Were his eyes always that hypnotic? Or was it just the

way they seemed so much more vivid against the gray of the afternoon? And Neptune save me when another raindrop teetered on the edge of his upper lip, only to slide free when he smiled.

More than once, I had to shake myself out of a daze and hope he didn't notice. But then a moment later, he'd get an adorable expression on his face, and suddenly jump and ask, "I'm sorry, could you run that by me again?" So maybe it wasn't just me.

"Anyway," he said after telling me about some of the people who came to the place where he worked during the day. "People are so weird. A while back, we had this lady come in with a group, and she just… I mean, she made sure we all knew how much she hated seafood. Fish, shellfish, lobsters—whatever. If it came out of the water, she didn't want it. But that's what we *serve*, you know?"

"So she didn't eat what you served?" I inclined my head. "Why was she there?"

"To complain, probably," he grumbled. "Her friends wanted lobster, and she wanted to come along, and I guess she thought we'd serve things other than seafood."

"Do you?"

"Well…biscuits? Pie?"

I blinked.

He smiled. "It's, um…bread. Not meat or…" He shook his head. "Anyway, it's something she's willing to eat, but she was mad that we didn't have anything else. She probably goes to a steak restaurant and complains because she doesn't like steak." He paused, and must have seen the confusion in my eyes. "Like jumping into the ocean and complaining about being wet."

I laughed. "All right, all right, now I understand. People really do that? Do things just so they can complain?"

"More often than you can imagine." He huffed with annoyance. "I think it's a hobby for some."

"A hobby?"

"Yeah. Something people do for fun." He laughed, then added, "Yes, land people really are that weird."

"Well, I've only spent any amount of time with one, and I haven't found him to be too weird."

Colin met my gaze and smiled shyly. Then he shifted onto one arm, and he ran his hand through his soaked hair, slicking it back except for a few stray strands that stubbornly tumbled over his forehead. Our eyes met, and he bit his lip as a blush crept into his cheeks. Was I obviously staring? Could he hear my heart pounding like this? Because it was impossible not to stare at him now, when he was wet and disheveled and just… just *him*. The man whose face and company drew me up from the depths again and again.

He shifted a little, his eyes darting away from mine for a heartbeat before he seemed to work up the courage to look at me again. “Is it true that, uh, land people and mer have really… hooked up?”

I blinked. “Hooked up?”

Colin’s blush deepened. “Had sex. Um…”

Understanding dawned, more from his shyness than the words, and my heart couldn’t possibly thunder any harder. “You mean…coupled?”

“Yes.” He swallowed. “That.”

I nodded. “So I’ve been told. Though I can’t begin to imagine *how*.”

Colin laughed, unaware of how much he lit up the gray afternoon when he did. “Okay, so it’s not just me, then.”

“Oh?”

“I, uh…” His cheeks turned an even deeper shade of pink, and he avoided my gaze as he cleared his throat. “Look, I don’t even know how mer do it with each other. Putting a land person and a mer together? Is that… Is that actually possible? Physically, I mean?”

“If the stories are to be believed, it is.” I chuckled. “But I suppose I’m as puzzled about it as you are—I can’t even imagine how land people couple with each other, never mind with a mer.”

“Really?” He paused. “Yeah, I guess you wouldn’t be able to any more than I could, would you?”

“No.” I hesitated, but then called on every reserve of courage I possessed. “Why do you ask? About mer and humans…”

“I, um… I mean, I never even knew mer existed until you. And now that I do…” Though his voice trailed off, he held my gaze with an intensity that made my tailfins curl.

“I’ve always known about land people,” I whispered. “I just never understood why a mer would want to be with one.” I ran my tongue across my lips, catching a raindrop as I did. “Not until now.”

Colin’s eyes flicked toward my lips before meeting my gaze again. “Really?

Without a word, I pulled myself up a little more, and I folded my arms on the dock in front of his. Our elbows were nearly touching now, and this close together, I could see the little flecks of gold and black in his brown eyes. His wide, startled eyes that were fixed on mine.

My heart went wild like it had during the storm that fateful night, and some of it was definitely fear this time too. Not all of it, though.

We were close. So close. Our words hung in the air between us, and now… Did we do something with that? Or let this moment fade away like all our conversations eventually did? That didn’t feel right. Not at all.

Doing something with it, though…

It was a mystery to me how land people coupled, never mind how a mer and a land person could, but there were some things I could figure out. So, cautiously, I drew myself up a bit more, bringing our faces closer together. Colin tensed, but he didn’t retreat.

I lifted my hand, and we both stilled when I touched his face. Ever since that first day in his presence after the storm, I’d been curious what the barely-there beard on his jaw would feel like, and now I didn’t have to wonder anymore. I trailed my fingertips over the warm surface, its texture somehow both soft and gritty, and even better was the way he pressed into my touch, as if searching for more.

“Colin…” I couldn’t find words besides his name. The gills that were still beneath the water barely remembered how to work, and my mouth couldn’t remember how to speak, and…

Colin’s hand slid behind my neck, and just like that, he kissed me.

His lips were soft and warm, his touch gentle and sweet, but there may as well have been lightning between us for all my body tingled right down to the tips of my fins. No one—not one of my mer lovers—had ever given me such a delicious rush with nothing more than a kiss.

As we separated, I eased myself back down into the water in the name of breathing more deeply, but even that didn’t help much, and the cool sea did nothing to quell the heat beneath my flesh. If I’d questioned at all that a land person could truly draw my desire the way a mer could, it had only taken a single kiss to wash away every last one of those doubts.

“Whoa,” Colin whispered.

I nodded, speechless.

Colin’s brow furrowed, and he seemed to lose focus for a moment. “Why did that feel familiar? Have we… Have we done that before?”

“Uh. Well.” I laughed nervously. “The night of the storm…”

His eyes widened.

“You needed gills or you’d have drowned.” I shrugged. “A kiss was the fastest way to give you that magic.”

He tilted his head. “Does that mean you could change me into a mer?”

“Not for very long, I’m afraid. My magic isn’t that powerful.”

“Damn.” He was smiling though, and leaned in a little. “I’m, um, not going to get gills *this* time, am I?”

I laughed. “Not unless you want them, no.”

“No!” He shook his head vigorously and squirmed. “Those things hurt. A *lot*.”

I grimaced. “Sorry.”

“Eh, they kept me alive.” He grinned and leaned in again, but paused with our lips just a breath apart. “No gills, right?”

“No gills.” I lifted my chin and grazed his lips with mine. “Promise.”

He laughed too, but then he kissed me, and it was a miracle my own gills didn’t forget how to work altogether. The gentleness of Colin’s mouth, the sheer magic of touching him this way, the desire rushing through me that I’d never felt for a mer, never mind a land person—was it *possible* to crave someone the way I craved Colin and still be able to think about anything else in the world?

His fingers twitched on the back of my neck. As he deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding across mine, he moaned so low in his throat, I didn’t even hear it at all—I just felt it the way I’d feel faraway thunder or a distant whale song. I kissed him deeper, running my fingers through his wet hair, searching for that perfect touch to make him moan like that again, and—there. Almost soundless, thrumming through us both, and then it was me making the same non-sound. His breath rushed past my cheek, cooling my wet skin, and I shivered. What I wouldn’t have given then and there to know how a mer and a land man could be together, because I wanted to know how he felt and sounded and trembled and gasped when he was close to release. I wanted to know what it was like to climax with this talented mouth against mine, and these gentle hands, and…

Colin broke away with a gasp and murmured, “Jesus…”

“Huh?”

“Just…” He shook his head and looked in my eyes. The color in his now formed thin bands around wide pupils, and his shoulders rose and fell with harsh breaths. “I’ve never kissed anyone like this before.”

“Neither have I.” I licked my lips, and the way he watched the gesture sent heat through my entire body. “I…definitely get why others have wanted land people.”

“Yeah?” He gave me a slightly crooked grin. “I can see the appeal of mer, too.”

I swallowed. I was about to draw him back in for another taste, but then I glanced past him and realized the gray sky was turning red around the edges. The sun was getting low. My shoulders sank as I faced Colin again. “It’s late. I want to stay, but I…”

He looked around, and he scowled. “Yeah, I guess it is. But I’ll see you again soon?” There was a hint of a plea in his voice, as if he were truly as hungry to see me again as I was to see him.

“As soon as possible.” I pulled myself up again, and our lips softly came together. Oh, for the love of Neptune—kisses like this didn’t *exist* beneath the sea. If they did, I’d never found them, and I wanted… needed… craved…

Colin touched his hot forehead to mine and panted in the space between our lips. “Definitely as soon as possible.”

“Definitely.” I kissed him once more, and despite wanting to be even closer to him, I made myself gently draw away. “Soon.”

He smiled, breathless and dazed. “Soon.”

If I stayed a moment longer, I’d be here until darkness fell, and I’d never be able to explain that to anyone. If I wanted to come back here again, I had to go now.

So I made myself slide down into the water. Colin put his hand over mine on the dock’s edge. We held each other’s gazes a moment longer, and then I eased all the way beneath the surface, leaving behind the heat and the rain and the man I’d see in my dreams.

Swimming away from the cove, I was in a daze. If I found my way home without having to double back a few times, I’d be surprised—my mind was latched on so strongly to those tender moments we’d shared, I barely noticed the rocks and landmarks that guided me.

All I could think about was Colin. My beautiful Colin.

If there was a way for us to be together—not just coupling, but together all the time—I wanted it. I would do anything for it. These encounters where our worlds met were nowhere near enough, especially now that I'd tasted his soft, sweet kiss. Every time I saw him, I wanted more. I wanted to be with him in ways that were impossible for a mer and a land person.

But even if we could never touch the way I had with other mer or he had with other land men, couldn't we have more than *this*?

*How do I make our worlds not just meet at the edges, but collide?*

# Chapter Nine

# COLIN

I dreamed about Lir that night. Hell, I was dreaming about him before I'd even gone to sleep. We were underwater during the storm, except this time I knew where I was and who I was with, and the kiss to give me gills hadn't been our last. We were just about to figure out how to make sex work between a man and a mer when my alarm clock rudely interrupted.

Grumbling all kinds of curse words, I shut off the alarm and rolled to my feet. As much as I wanted to lie in bed and think about Lir, I had to be at the lobster pound early today to help Haley with prep for lunch and dinner. Getting up early sucked, but it meant clocking out early too, so I'd live with it.

Showered, shaved, and dressed, I headed to the lobster pound. Just a few more hours, and I could settle on the end of the dock and spend time with Lir. Assuming there was a shell at the end when I came home this afternoon.

*Please, please, let there be a shell. God, I want to see him again so bad.*

First things first—work.

Lobster season was in full swing, and so was tourist season. At lunchtime, two giant tour buses pulled into the gravel parking lot about fifteen minutes apart. One was full of energetic white senior citizens who were endlessly amused by saying "lobstah" and seemed disappointed that Haley and I didn't have much in the way of Maine accents. The other group consisted of a bunch of teenagers in matching—not to mention retina-scorching—yellow T-shirts who wanted to take selfies with their live lobsters (really, guys?) in between daring each other to eat entire cups of

butter sauce. Both buses had clipboard-wielding guides who ran between tables and made sure everyone was where they needed to be. I couldn't decide which guide looked more exhausted, but I didn't envy either of them.

Somehow, we squeezed everyone in at MerMaine Magic's cluster of outdoor picnic tables. Good thing the weather was holding out today. Yesterday had been wet as hell, and when it rained, we could move about a dozen tables under an overhang that shielded customers while still maintaining the picnic vibe, but there wasn't room for all the tables.

Fortunately, that wasn't an issue today, and in no time, everyone was seated, and Haley and I were taking orders while Joan and her other two employees cooked. I ran plate after plate of lobster, corn, and butter sauce out to tables, followed by a million slices of Maine blueberry pie, and in between, I made sure people had enough paper towels and drink refills. Never a dull moment here during peak season.

One bus finished, and the senior citizens started filing aboard so they could get into town in time for a whale-watching excursion. I wasn't so sure that was wise, stuffing everyone with lobster and butter before taking them out on a boat in the open sea, but as long as I wasn't the one who had to mop up the results, it was none of my business.

The teenagers lingered for a while, probably to give their chaperones a break from dealing with them on the bus, but around the time I'd finished cleaning the tables from the other bus, they finally started making noise about leaving.

As I was carrying out some trash, a Jeep pulled into the gravel parking lot. Four people, by the looks of it, so after I'd tossed the trash, I grabbed four menus and a roll of paper towels. I glanced around, and there was a clean, empty table near the edge of the lawn, so I'd seat them there.

I stepped out to greet them, and froze.

Oh God. Oh, that was not who I needed to encounter today.

"Holy shit!" One of them blinked, then grinned broadly. "You did make it back to shore!"

"Wow," Wes Martin said with a sneer. "So you really *did* wash up." He stepped close enough to loom over me and put a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Guess you can swim after all."

I gulped. In my mind, I could see myself tearing each of them a new one before summarily banning them from MerMaine Magic forever. I could see

myself reading them the riot act for destroying the boat's props and leaving me out there to die.

But in reality, I was too scared to speak. These were men who'd literally tried to kill me and had nearly succeeded.

Keeping my fear hidden as much as possible, I tucked the roll of paper towels under my arm and picked up some place settings. "Let me show you to your table."

They followed, snickering as they walked, and I swore I heard a few homophobic slurs being passed around. Awesome. Totally what I needed.

Once they were situated, I set my jaw and faced them. "What can I get everyone to drink?"

The assholes ordered beers because of course they did, and I shuddered at the thought of how drunk they planned on getting here. Trashed tourists were always a pain in the ass, but trashed locals who wanted me dead? That…could get awkward.

I hurried into the building with their drink order, and as soon as I was inside and out of sight, I stopped to catch my breath and try not to throw up. That was when the shaking started. Shit. Oh shit. Why did they have to come here? Why did they have to be someplace I couldn't get away from them?

And why did I have to be such a goddamned coward when it came to these assholes?

Oh, right. Because next to no one had my back, and it was scary as fuck to face down people who'd already tried to kill you once. Being a coward right now didn't make me spineless. It was survival, for fuck's sake.

"Colin?" Haley's voice startled me. She touched my shoulder, unaware she'd put her hand in the same place Wes had. "What's wrong?"

"I'm…" I swallowed bile. Was there any point in even pretending I was fine? Because I was way too far from fine to fake it. Forcing my eyes open, I turned to her and croaked, "The night I almost drowned?" I gestured outside. "Those were the guys. They…"

Joan walked in, and as soon as she saw us, her eyes widened with concern.

Haley barreled on. "Who? What are you talking about?"

I glanced at Joan, then sighed, shoulder sagging under Haley's hand. "They fucked up the boat. On purpose." I swallowed and somehow managed to choke out, "They tried to kill me."

“Wait, what?” Haley cupped my face in both hands and made me look her right in the eyes. “Colin, what are you talking about?”

“The boat.” I squeezed my eyes shut because I couldn’t handle their scrutiny. “They… They’re the reason the props got fouled. I had just started the engines so I could get out of there, and they threw some lobster lines over the props.”

“Holy shit,” Joan breathed. “They did it on *purpose*?”

“Yeah. I know they did. No doubt in my mind.”

“We need to call the cops,” she declared.

“No!” I put up my hands. “No. Don’t. Please don’t.”

“Why the hell not?” She pointed at the door. “Those men tried to *kill* you, Colin.”

“And how can I prove it? It’s my word against theirs, and by now, you know they’ve all cooked up an alibi.” My shoulders sagged. “And God knows my parents will try to shut me up.”

“Damn. You’re right.” Joan’s features hardened. “Well, police or no police, they’re not welcome in my lobster pound.” She strode out of the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind her as she threw over her shoulder, “They can eat someone else’s lobster.” Haley hesitated, then followed her.

I didn’t try to stop them, and I didn’t go outside to watch them boot the assholes out. I didn’t try to encourage them, either.

I just stayed back in the kitchen like the coward I was and tried not to think about how this would eventually find a way to bite me in the ass.

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The shell on the end of the dock almost drove me to tears. I’d been eager to see Lir again after he’d kissed me yesterday, but now the sheer relief of going to him and leaving this shitty world behind—God, I needed that. If I could have jumped in with him and left it all behind for real, I would’ve done it in a heartbeat, but spending some time with him at what may as well have been the end of the earth… That would have to be enough, wouldn’t it?

I hurried out to our meeting place, put my hand on the water’s surface, and said his name.

As always, he was there in minutes, breaking through the surface and sending a rush of excitement and need through me. I swear, if it hadn't been for a couple of icy droplets landing on my hand and reminding me how *fucking cold* the Atlantic was, even this time of year, I'd have been tempted to jump in with him just so we could touch for real.

I sat on the edge of the dock, but for the first time, couldn't quite keep my attention fixed on Lir. Usually, when I was with him, the rest of the world faded away and stopped mattering for a while. Today, it was constantly there, prodding at my senses like a buzzing, flickering fluorescent light.

*They tried to kill me, and then they showed up at my work.*

*There's nothing I can do. I can't have them arrested. I can't confront them. I can't—*

"What's wrong?" Lir covered my hand with his. "You seem upset." He tilted his head. "Is this… Should we not have—"

"Oh God, no! It wasn't about that." I turned my hand over and squeezed his. "It was just a rough day. A really rough one."

He studied me, the question written all over his face. Damn it, I'd wanted us to pick up where we'd left off last night. Screw splinters and a stiff neck—I wanted to lie down on this dock and get lost in Lir's kiss until… until… Fuck it, I didn't care if or when we ever stopped.

"Colin?"

I dropped my gaze to our hands. "Remember the night we met? The storm, I mean?"

"Of course. I won't ever forget that night."

"Neither will I," I mumbled. "Remember the other boat that showed up right before my boat malfunctioned?"

"Yes."

I took a deep breath and stared down at our hands, studying the alternating pattern of our differently colored fingers laced together. "The guys who were on the boat… I saw them today while I was at work. And they're, um… They're the *reason* my boat malfunctioned."

Lir stiffened. "How do you mean?"

"They sabotaged my boat. Fucked up the props so I wouldn't be able to go back to shore." I swallowed past the queasiness rising in my throat. "On purpose."

“What?” Lir stared up at me, blue-green eyes huge. “But why would they do that to you?”

“Because I’m gay.”

He blinked. “Gay?”

“Yeah, I…” I sighed. “I’m not interested in women. Just men.”

Confusion was etched all over his face. “So just because you only couple with men…they tried to kill you?”

Shuddering, I nodded. “Basically.”

Lir stared at me as if he either hadn’t heard me right or was waiting for me to elaborate.

“That’s it,” I said with a tight shrug. “I’m gay, and they hate that. They hate me for it.” I paused. “Not everyone’s like that. There are a lot of people around here who are gay or who don’t see a problem with it. I mean, the women who own the boat I was on? They’re lesbians.” Beat. “Women who are just into women.”

He nodded, but the confusion lingered. “What is there to hate, though?”

I laughed bitterly. “I’ve wondered that myself for a long time. But people get in their heads that we’re degenerates and abominations and…”

Lir’s brow furrowed and he cocked his head.

Christ, he didn’t get it. He had no idea. And my God, I suddenly envied him for his confusion. He seemed utterly mystified that a person could be killed for being gay. Not in shock like Joan and Haley because it had hit too close to home, but truly baffled as if I’d told him my car had suddenly turned sentient and tried to murder me. I’d wondered if it was really possible for violent homophobia—or *any* homophobia—to just not exist in his world, and I guess I had my answer.

Sighing, I waved my hand. “They think we’re disgusting. That there’s something wrong with us.” I paused. “Do the mer ever get weird about people being gay?”

Lir shrugged. “There isn’t really a word for it. Being, um, gay, I suppose. People couple with whoever they want. I’ve probably had as many lovers who were men as not.”

“And it doesn’t bother anyone?”

He looked as mystified as I felt. “Why would it?”

“Um.” I thought fast, trying to recall some of the arguments people used beyond “gross, gay.” “Some people think it’s not natural.”

Lir barked a laugh. “Not *natural*? Most of what land people *do* isn’t natural.” He waved a hand at me, sending droplets flying across the dock. “You don’t even leave your homes without covering yourselves.”

I looked down at my clothes, then at him. “Oh, we wear these at home too.”

His brow quirked. “You do?”

“Usually, yeah. And yes, people get weird about seeing each other naked or being seen naked. Especially if the person who sees them is gay.” I swallowed. “That’s why the guys on that other boat were so pissed at me. When we were in school, I swam competitively with a couple of them.”

Lir arched a brow. “Swam? Competitively?”

I chuckled and waved a hand. “There aren’t many things that we don’t do competitively, let’s put it that way. Anyway, when we competed, we had to wear these really tiny things. Like…” I sat up a little and gestured an outline of a Speedo. “That’s about all it covered.”

He still looked confused.

I eased myself back down. “Yeah, I know, we’re weird about that too. Especially at that age because we’re all… Anyway, it’s weird. And I guess some of the guys I used to swim with found out later that I’m gay. So they got it into their heads that the only reason I was on the team was to stare at them when they were practically naked, or when they *were* naked in the changing rooms before practice.” I rolled my eyes.

“And that was enough to justify *killing* you?”

“In their minds, yeah.”

He stared at me in horror. “But…*how?*”

“I don’t even know where to start, honestly. It’s… There’s just a long history of people hating people like me.” I swallowed hard, my throat burning with acid. “Anyway, the night you and I met, they came out and confronted me on the water. They’d heard rumors that I’d come out as gay, and they wanted to know if it was true. So then the guy said if I really was on the team to swim and not to stare at him and the other guys, then I should prove it. By swimming back to shore.”

Lir’s eyes widened. “In stormy seas?”

“Not to mention water that cold,” I grumbled. “The pools we swam in back then were heated, and there sure as shit wasn’t a current or wind. Plus, it’s been a couple of years. Maybe when I was in peak condition, I could’ve done it. But now?” I shook my head. “No way.”

“Did they know that?”

“They were *counting* on it,” I breathed.

His lips parted. “And there’s nothing you can do?”

“Not really, no.” I rolled my tense shoulders. “It’s… I’ll deal with it. But I really don’t want to spend our time together bitching about—”

“It’s all right. I’m just worried about you.”

“Don’t be.” I squeezed his hand. “I’ll be fine. They just rattled me.”

He frowned up at me. Then he lifted himself out of the water and kissed me softly, and damn if that didn’t almost fool me into believing everything was right in the world. Couldn’t we stay out here longer and let me pretend things were fine?

No, because he couldn’t stay long, or else he wouldn’t be able to come back at all.

I touched his face, his skin smooth and cool beneath my touch. “How is it that everything in my world can be a mess, but then I see you, and suddenly it all seems fine?”

Lir smiled, shaking his head slightly. “I don’t know.” The smile faded. “I wish there was more I could do, though. For everything wrong in your world, and for, well…” He put his hand over mine.

“Me too.” I caressed his cheek with the pad of my thumb. “So much more.”

He smiled, somehow appearing both dreamy and sad. “But if this is all I can have…”

“Then I won’t complain.” I kissed him again. “Better than not knowing you at all.”

“I agree.” Sobering, he touched my face. “But be careful between when I leave and when I see you again, all right?”

“I’m always careful. I promise.”

*I just wish you never had to leave.*

---

My conversation with Lir stuck with me as I walked up to the big house the following night. I’d been summoned for Sunday dinner, and didn’t dare try to weasel out unless I wanted more surprise visits from Mom.

So I went. And all the way up the long walk, I debated telling them what happened at MerMaine the other day. After all, even if they didn't approve of me being gay, my parents couldn't possibly see that as an excuse for someone to do me harm. Could they? Would they really think I deserved something like that just for being openly gay?

I mean, maybe if we'd lived in some other place, I'd have stayed in the closet until I could leave town. There were cities and towns that were dangerous as hell for queer people to be out, and I wasn't stupid enough to think otherwise.

Politically, Maine was a pretty mixed bag. It wasn't unusual to see a rainbow bumper sticker, and then five minutes later see someone wearing a MAGA hat. There were a lot of people around Bar Harbor who were out and proud, and there were plenty who had opinions about that, for better or worse. Maybe this wasn't *quite* the rainbow-flag-waving, queer-friendly haven like I'd heard Seattle, San Francisco, and New York were supposed to be, but everybody just kind of lived and let live most of the time.

Except when they didn't.

I shuddered at the memory of the taunting and hatred coming from Wes Martin's boat. Even now, weeks later, I could still feel that panic in my chest when I'd realized they'd fouled the boat's props and I was dead in the water. Especially since I was pretty sure I was about to be *literally* dead in the water.

And it wasn't just the violent, dangerous homophobes. It was the insidiously polite ones. Those who asked us to be discreet, who legitimately thought they were doing the equivalent of saying "please don't come to dinner with your dick hanging out." Those who weren't outwardly nasty but were "just concerned about this lifestyle affecting your well-being" and "don't want to see you hurt your success with a bad reputation."

Just my luck, that was exactly the breed of homophobe who'd raised me, and who I was joining for dinner tonight. Yay.

At the back door, I paused like I always did and steeled myself. It was just dinner. Maybe an hour or so, plus coffee afterward, and then I could retreat to my little slice of privacy at the other end of the property. I could deal with it. I did it all the time.

So why did it seem like such an enormous proposition this time?

I supposed that was easy enough to figure out—I'd been feeling raw over what happened because of my encounter with Wes Martin and his

buddies, and because I'd explained it all to Joan, Haley, and Lir. I hadn't told anyone *here* the truth about what happened to the boat, about why I'd been stranded out there when the storm hit, and it was like tearing open a wound. I couldn't stop thinking about it or feeling sick about it, and every time I so much as thought about one of my parents, I was almost overcome with the need to *tell* them about it.

As far as they knew, I'd miraculously survived a freak accident during a storm. What would they say if I told them the truth?

I wanted to believe they'd be furious and horrified that someone would do that to me, but I wasn't optimistic. Not after their responses when I'd come out of the closet. That was a cycle I'd learned well from the time I was a child: Worry they'd respond in the worst possible way. Convince myself I was overreacting and they wouldn't do that because they were my parents. Tell them what I needed to tell them. Somehow still be shocked when their response was even worse than I'd originally feared. Lather, rinse, repeat from the age of baseballs through windows to "I'm gay," and continue right on into adulthood.

As I let myself into the house, I forced back a sudden wave of nausea. Then I wondered if maybe I should just let the nausea do its thing and use it to bow out of dinner for once. On the other hand, Graciela, the housekeeper, was already run ragged keeping up with my mom's demands. I didn't need to add "cleaning the carpet" to her never-ending list.

Okay, I could pull it together and make it through dinner. For Graciela.

At least I wouldn't be alone with my parents. As they tried to do about once a month, my older brother, Jason, and his wife, Chelsie, had made the trek from Bangor to join the family. Our sister, Danielle, was going to school in New York, so she didn't make it out here very often. Lucky her, considering Dad barely acknowledged her and Mom didn't approve of anything she did. Dinners in this house were *fun*.

All too soon, we were seated in the giant dining room. Since my parents weren't entertaining tonight, most of the leaves had been taken out of the table, and we all still ended up sitting a good arm's length apart. A little too close, honestly.

Dinner was served, and my parents made most of the conversation, though Dad occasionally asked Jason how work was going. Fine. Keep talking. I had shit on my mind that wouldn't be welcome in this room.

After a while, though, Mom shot me a pointed look. “Colin, what’s wrong?” She sounded more annoyed than concerned. “You’ve barely said a word or touched your food.”

I glanced down at the pot roast and potatoes that I didn’t feel like eating. I loved Graciela’s pot roast, but tonight, I couldn’t stomach much of anything. “I, um…”

“You’ve been acting weird lately anyway,” Dad said. “Ever since that incident on the boat, you haven’t been yourself. We’ve barely seen you except when your mother comes down to the guesthouse. What’s going on?” I wondered if other dads sounded worried when they asked that, rather than resigned like they were asking the mechanic, *“What’s wrong and how much is it going to cost me?”*

Oh, hell. Might as well put it out there so I could stop angsting myself to death over their hypothetical reactions.

“It’s, um…” I folded my hands in my lap. “Actually it’s *about* what happened out on the boat.”

My mother straightened. “What do you mean? Do you need to see a therapist? I’m sure we can find one for you. I’ve heard there are good ones in Portland. Probably even in Bangor.”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. There were therapists in Bar Harbor and Ellsworth too, but it would be better to go an hour away to Bangor or—better yet—three hours to Portland so fewer people would know about it and would *talk*.

“I don’t need a therapist.” *Not for this, anyway.* I shifted in my chair, staring down at the less than appetizing food. “But the boat didn’t malfunction.”

Everyone in the room stilled.

“What do you mean it ‘didn’t malfunction’?” Dad put his fork down with an emphatic clatter. “I spent almost two thousand dollars getting it back up and running after those damn lobster lines destroyed the props.”

“Yeah, well…” I swallowed, which took some serious effort. “I mean it didn’t just get tangled in a random lobster line.” I lifted my gaze and looked my father in the eye. “Someone damaged it. On purpose.”

If I thought everyone had gone still a moment ago, they were downright frozen now.

My brother spoke first. “Someone sabotaged your boat?” He furrowed his brow. “Why in the world would they do that? Was it a competing

lobsterman or something?”

“N-no.” I reached for my water glass, but didn’t get farther than wrapping my fingers around the cold stem. “It was actually some guys I knew from high school. Wes Martin. And some of his buddies.”

“And, what?” Dad watched me, his expression full of bewilderment. “They just crippled the boat in open water right before a storm? For fun?”

I brought the glass up for a drink, hoping my sweaty fingers wouldn’t slip on the condensation. As I unsteadily put it back down, I said, “Wes and I were on the swim team in high school. He said if I really was on the team to swim and not to perv on him and the other guys, then I should prove it.” I swallowed again. “By swimming back to shore. So he threw some lobster lines on the boat’s props and fouled them up.”

“That’s insane!” Jason said. “Jesus, you could’ve drowned!”

My mother put her elbow beside her plate and rubbed her forehead. “My God.”

Dad pushed out a breath but didn’t speak.

Mom dropped her hand to the table and turned an exhausted look on me. “Do you see now? *This* is why you shouldn’t have made such a production out of what you are.”

“Such a…” I blinked. “What production? All I did was say ‘I’m gay’!”

“And that was enough for someone to try to drown you, Colin,” Dad said in an impatient *why do I have to explain this to you?* tone. “They were boys who figured out they’d been sharing a locker room and swimming pool with a homosexual. What did you expect?”

I stared at him, struggling to process the words. “I…expected them to not try to kill me, for one thing.”

Mom put a hand to her chest, shook her head, and took a deep swallow of wine.

Dad sat back, his face as exasperated as his tone. “What would you like us to do, then? Contact the police? File a report?”

“You know how that will work out,” Mom said. “Just like when you were in school and we’d intervene when someone bullied you. They’d just wait until they had you alone and then terrorize you all over again.”

I gritted my teeth. “Did you ever think maybe that meant nobody was doing enough to address the problem?”

“Colin. Honey.” Mom gestured with her wineglass. “You kids all had to learn to defend yourselves and sort out your problems without parents

intervening. And now you're adults! Do you expect me to suddenly become a helicopter parent overnight?" She wrinkled her nose, then took a deep swallow of wine.

I blinked. She *was* a helicopter parent, at least in the sense that she smothered and controlled us in order to be seen as a doting mother. When it came to the actual work, well, suddenly the kids needed to figure things out themselves.

"Mom, this wasn't just some frat boy hazing or playground bullying." I glanced at each of my parents in turn. "They tried to *kill* me. And they almost succeeded."

"You don't know that they actually tried to kill you," Dad protested. "They may be idiots, but they're not stupid enough to risk a wrongful death lawsuit from our family."

My lips parted. That was the line? I mean, I suppose it didn't surprise me, coming from my dad. It was absolutely on brand for him. But it was still tough to swallow that the only reason he didn't think Wes and his cronies were *actually* trying to kill me was that they weren't stupid enough to put themselves in my dad's litigious crosshairs.

"They crippled the boat," I said as evenly as I could. "And then they left me there with a storm rolling in and told me to swim to shore to prove I'd been on the team to swim and not perv." I threw up my hands. "I mean, maybe they weren't willing to shoot me or something, but what else could they have expected from that except me drowning or freezing?"

Uncomfortable silence hovered over the dinner table for a long time. Finally, Mom sipped her wine and turned to my brother and his wife. "So. Are we any closer to grandchildren?"

My sister-in-law didn't make a sound, but I swore I *felt* her jaw clench. I felt guilty for it, but I was relieved by the abrupt subject change. If my parents weren't going to take the situation seriously, then I didn't want to discuss it with them. I just wished I could have thought of a better distraction than the never-ending haranguing about when—or *if*—Jason and Chelsie were having kids.

While they talked, I picked at my food. There were moments when I thought my parents loved me and my siblings. My mom more often than my dad. Most of the time, though, they were too in love with their status to have room for us. They were in love with what it meant to be an Everroad,

and all the money, power, and admiration that came with it. My siblings and me, we were just here to carry on the family's legacy.

I shuddered at the thought of how easily I could have made it to adulthood thinking this was a healthy, functional family dynamic. At least books, TV, and the internet were good for something.

Not a moment too soon, dinner was over, and I got the fuck out of there. After saying good night to everyone, I left through the back and followed the familiar path.

I paused at the guesthouse's back door, turned on the floodlights, and I let my gaze drift toward the dock. There was no shell on the end, which wasn't a surprise this late in the evening, but I was still disappointed.

I stared at the dock. Then the path I'd come down from the big house. Then the dock again.

My family was two hundred yards up a winding path in the house where I'd grown up, but they may as well have been on another planet.

I was falling head over heels for someone who could never live in my world and could never take me to live in his.

I'd never imagined it was possible to feel this lonely.

But there it was.

# Chapter Ten

# LIR

Colin and I continued our dockside visits. Sometimes he seemed sad, but before long, we'd be lost in each other—talking, kissing, just being together—and he was always smiling by the time I left. I wished there was more I could do for him and for his unhappiness with his family, but at least I could give him a reason to smile.

Today, as I often did, I stayed as long as I could until the sun began to sink low enough that I couldn't put it off any longer. Prying myself away from Colin was never easy, especially now that we'd moved from long conversations to long conversations punctuated by decadent kisses. More than once, I swam away from the dock as the sun was setting.

The darkness wasn't a problem for me. Mer could see well enough beneath the surface without all the artificial light contraptions that humans needed. In the deepest shadowy recesses of our cavern homes, we used glowing fish and magic, but even without them, we could navigate without getting lost or crashing into rocks.

I could make it home despite the fading light. The problem was that returning home this late meant I'd been gone a long time. Long enough that someone was bound to take notice.

Tonight, as I often did when I returned to the palace, I went around to a side entrance—one of the tunnels that few knew about and even fewer used. It was guarded on the outside, but the sentries all knew me and my siblings, and by now, they were probably used to me sneaking in through various entrances. They'd also been thoroughly bribed to look the other way and not report my unusual comings and goings to anyone.

As they usually did, the sentry watched me approach with bored disinterest, and she gave me a nod as I passed her. I returned it, then slipped inside and swam fast through the winding tunnel. If I could make it in unnoticed by anyone in my family, then no one would have any reason to believe I'd been anywhere I shouldn't.

The tunnel came to a fork. I followed it to the left, flipping my tail hard to pick up some speed. Just a little farther, and I'd be—

"*Lir.*" Caspian's voice hit me like a rip current, and I nearly slammed into the wall before I regained control and turned. He emerged from one of the side tunnels, face alight with fury. "Where have you been?"

"I—"

"Never mind. I'm not the one who wants to know." He reached for my arm, but I jerked out of the way. Narrowing his eyes, he growled, "Mother wants to know."

I froze. "What?"

"She knows you've been disappearing. That you're away longer and longer each time, coming back well after the sun's gone down." He motioned down the tunnel in the direction I'd been heading. "You'll need to answer to her."

I gritted my teeth. "Mother barely has time to notice when we're right under her nose. If she knows I've been gone, then someone must have told her."

Caspian set his jaw. "She wants to see you. *Now*."

I held his gaze defiantly despite my nervously pounding heart. Someone knew. Curse it. Caspian or one of our other siblings had undoubtedly brought it to our parents' attention that I was disappearing, and they probably knew I'd been going to the surface. Horror descended into the pit of my stomach as I wondered how much they knew about *why* I'd been surfacing.

"Come." He reached for my arm again, and this time grabbed it roughly. "Now."

There was no point in resisting. I wrenched my arm free but followed Caspian to our parents' chamber. As soon as we swam inside, my mother turned to me, and her expression contorted with anger.

"Where have you been?" she demanded. "Is it true? That you've been surfacing again even though I forbid it?"

I had no idea how much she actually knew or how much my brother and sisters had actually seen. Lying would do me no good if she was fully aware that I'd been visiting—and more—with a land man. So I swallowed hard and looked her in the eyes. "I befriended a land person. I've been—"

"Befriended?" she spat. "I've heard you did more than *befriend* him."

My heart sank. Someone *had* followed me. They knew. She knew. Shoulders drooping, I nodded. "Yes. It's true."

She groaned with exasperation and grabbed my shoulders. "Why? What were you thinking, Lir? You know what the land people are capable of, and —"

"Because he's kind and sweet and I fell in love with him." The words jarred me as much as they did her. I hadn't said them aloud before now. Hadn't even really let myself think them. But then they'd come tumbling out, and as they echoed in my ears, I couldn't pretend they were untrue. My voice so quiet even I could barely hear it, I whispered, "I love him."

"Lir." She let go and swam back, flailing her hand and swimming a frustrated circle. You're smarter than this. Why? Why would you—what were you thinking?"

*That no one has ever made me wish I could leave my world for his.*

"I don't—"

"It doesn't matter." With an irritated snap of her tailfins, she was face to face with me again, lips peeled back and eyes narrow as she glared down at me. "What matters is that if I hear that you've gone to the surface again, or that you've even suggested that you might, I will have you confined to the palace under guard. Am I clear?"

I nodded. "Yes."

She dismissed me with a sharp wave.

I left, swimming hard out of the chamber and into the corridor, grateful for the blood pounding in my ears because it drowned out my brother's voice as he tried to keep up. I supposed I should be grateful it was again my mother who'd confronted me. My father would still be bellowing and demanding explanations, but Mother didn't have the patience for that. I was a fool for going to the surface; I was forbidden to do it again, and if I disobeyed her this time, there *would* be consequences.

"Lir, would you *listen* to me?"

I whirled around, and Caspian and I nearly collided. Glaring into his eyes, I growled, "Haven't I listened to you enough? I'm not going to the

surface again, so—”

“You say that,” he snarled back. “You continue to say that. And yet…” He gestured sharply upward.

“And what difference does it make?” I swam closer, so we were nearly nose to nose. “Has anyone been harmed by me surfacing? Have I brought any danger to—”

“Not yet, no,” he snapped. “But who’s to say you won’t be harpooned and dried the next time? Or that you won’t lead a whole fleet of them down to us?” He jabbed me in the chest with a finger. “There’s no telling what kind of danger you’ll bring to yourself and *your people* if you continue to go up there.”

*And there’s no way I can make you understand the amazing man I’ll never see again if I don’t go back.*

I clenched my teeth, refusing to break in front of him. I suddenly didn’t have the energy to argue with my brother. Not anymore. My mother had said her piece, and I was forbidden from going to the surface. I was forbidden from going to Colin. Nothing I said to Caspian now would change that, and nothing would take away the pain settling into my chest.

Because my mother wasn’t bluffing. If I went to the surface again, it *would* be the last time. She had enough power to make sure I never left this palace without her knowing it and to keep any mer restricted to the city if their leaving posed a risk to us all. If I disobeyed this time, I wouldn’t have a chance to do it again.

I tore my gaze away from my brother’s furious glare, and I fought back the lump in my throat as the truth burrowed deeper: Colin was gone. I couldn’t see him again. That last kiss we’d shared tonight…that would be the last kiss. Ever. *Maybe* I could slip away one final time to say goodbye, but after that, it would be over.

“Lir.” Caspian’s voice softened. “I just want to—”

“I’ve heard enough.” My own voice sounded weak and shaky. “You’ve won. Leave me alone.”

And with that, I swam away toward my own chamber.

If I were smart, I would stay down here no matter how much it hurt.

But I needed to see Colin. I *had* to go to him, even if it was just one more time. And if it was going to be the last time I surfaced…

*What if there’s a way we won’t have to say goodbye?*

My eldest sister kept watch while I visited friends at the shipwreck. Ever since my mother had ordered me to stay beneath the sea, my siblings had been vigilant, watching me whenever I ventured out of the palace. No other adult mer were as beholden to their parents as we were, but such was the life of a king and queen's children. I'd have given up my birthright and my place in the palace without a moment's hesitation if it meant having the freedom my friends did to swim where and when they wanted.

Though even other mer didn't have the freedom to surface without scrutiny. There was too much fear of the land people. Surfacing once in a while didn't attract much attention. Even if I weren't royalty, my frequent visits to the land would have had me confined to the city sooner or later. There'd been a time when I'd understood that. When I'd agreed that anyone so reckless with their own safety and the safety of our people *should* be kept down here. By force if necessary.

Things had changed, though. I had changed. And right now, I was desperate to make one last swim to the surface.

While I mingled with friends, I kept an eye on my sister. As soon as her back was turned, I darted away, hoping speed and shadows were enough to take me out of her sight.

But I wasn't heading for the surface this time.

Instead, I headed toward a trench that every mer knew and avoided.

The sea witch's lair was deeper than the realm of the mer. There wasn't a mer alive who hadn't sneaked out this way in their youth, proving their grit by getting as close as they dared to the witch's trench.

Caspian had gone into the trench and disappeared over its lip, diving for all he was worth while the rest of us had stared in both terror and awe. When he'd returned moments later, he'd proudly held up a smooth rock he said he'd picked up from the very bottom. He'd seen the entrance to the lair itself and described it in great detail to all who would listen.

From then on, no one could truly call themselves brave unless they returned from the trench with a stone.

Of course Caspian had been soundly punished upon our return—we all were after our ventures into the trench—but he'd always said it was worth it. He still had that stone, and he treasured it.

Five years later, when my own friends had begun making those dives, no matter how much our parents tried to dissuade us, everyone had told me I should stay back. The sea witch was dangerous, after all, and though I'd been fifteen just like the others, I was smaller.

I was also faster, and I'd spent my whole life being told I was too young and too small, so I'd refused to stay away.

Swimming for all I was worth into that treacherous trench, my greatest fear had been failure. That I'd dive down, let fear get the best of me, and return without a rock to prove I'd been to the bottom.

I hadn't returned with a stone—I'd returned with a corroded piece of metal from *inside* the sunken ship the sea witch called home. And like any mer who wanted to live, I hadn't been back since.

Not until now.

At the edge of the trench, I gazed down into the abyss. The ship's familiar shape still sat amongst the rocks. Long fronds of seaweed danced lazily in the current, and a dim, warm glow illuminated the entrance where a handful of mer had seen the sea witch herself coming and going.

We all knew she was there. We all knew she was real and powerful. And we'd all been warned to stay far, far away—no one returned from their youthful dive without being punished for their recklessness, and years later they'd punish their own children for the same rite of passage.

Today, ignoring the warnings and the fear, I swam over the lip of the trench and dove.

I had no idea if the water truly was colder down here, or if it was simply my proximity to the sea witch that chilled my flesh and gills. The last time, I'd only been coming for a souvenir to prove my mettle, and I'd hoped to slip in and out without being seen. This time I wanted to be seen. I wanted an audience with the sea witch.

More than once on the way down, I considered going back because only a fool would come here at all, never mind talk to her.

But there was no one else in the sea who could blur the lines between Colin's world and mine. I didn't even know if she could do it, but who else could I ask?

So I swam.

And before I knew it, I was in the mouth of that familiar lair, swimming into the shipwreck and toward the distant light.

"What are you doing in my house?"

I whipped around and… And there she was.

Every mer had a theory about what the sea witch looked like, and even those who claimed they'd seen her had wild descriptions that they swore were the truth.

None of them fit the woman looking back at me now.

She was mer, that much was clear. Her skin was paler, her eyes large and dark. Her long black hair swayed like seaweed, its ends disappearing into the shadows of her lair. Her shimmering fins and scales were as black as her hair and the shadows—that much had made it into the legends about her, but she'd always been described as monstrous and ugly. Instead, she was as beautiful as any mer woman I'd ever known, with a soft face and flawless figure that any mer—man or woman—would have given their souls for.

Tiny dots of light illuminated the shape of her body, her fins, and the edges of her gills. Bioluminescence, I remembered Colin saying, and somehow that memory steeled my resolve. In the presence of the sea witch, any mer's instinct was to swim like they were trying to escape a shark or a harpoon-wielding land person.

But if I wanted to see Colin again…

If I wanted to be with him despite our different worlds…

"Hello." I swallowed. "I, um—"

"What is it you want, Lir?"

I blinked. "You know—"

"Ugh." She batted a tendril of hair out of her face. "Must I go through this with every mer who comes here? Yes, I know your name. Yes, I know who you are. Yes, I know you're the youngest son of the mer king and queen." She shot me an impatient glare. "What I don't know is what you *want*, so…" She beckoned sharply. "Out with it." But before I could speak, her expression darkened. "Hold on. I remember you." She swam closer and narrowed her eyes as she circled me. "You stole something from my house. From right… over…" She pointed a long finger toward the entrance. "*There*."

I gulped. "I did. Yes."

"And you're coming back here now?" She stopped in front of me, her eyes deep, black pools of anger. "Probably to ask a favor, since no mer ever come here for any other reason."

"I… Well, yes, I—"

“What is it, then?” she snapped. “Get on with it.”

I hesitated. “Um. Well. There’s a land person. I—”

“And you’re in love with her?” The sea witch grinned. “Well, if that isn’t a tale as old as the ocean itself—a mer falling for a land woman.”

“Um. Well. A land man, actually.”

She waved a hand. “The story is the same. Let me guess—you want to go to the land and be with him.”

“Is that possible?”

“Is it what you want?”

I nodded. “Very much, yes.”

“Well.” She smiled. “Lucky for you, it can be arranged.”

My heart jumped. “It can?”

“Yes.” The sea witch held up a finger. “But there is a price.”

Cold dread coiled in my chest. “What price?”

“Bring back what you stole from me.” She pointed at the place where I’d tugged the chunk of corroded metal free. “And I will make sure you and your land man can be together.”

“That’s… That’s it?”

She nodded.

I chewed my lip. It was a small price, but it meant returning to the palace. By now, someone had to have noticed I’d slipped away from my sister, and if anyone saw me, they’d confine me.

“I won’t accept any other payment.” The sea witch’s tone was firm. “The missing piece of my house. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“I, um… Okay. All right. I’ll…” Renewed apprehension knotted behind my ribs. “But you can help us? You can—”

“Bring me back my missing piece, and we’ll talk. Until then, there is nothing to discuss.”

With that, she swam back into the depths of her lair, leaving me alone in the cold, dark entrance. I gulped. What choice did I have? It was possible she had no way of uniting me with Colin, but it was also possible she *did* have a way.

All right. Well. That left me with two choices.

Go to Colin and say goodbye.

Or risk being caught coming back into the palace, retrieve the piece I’d stolen from the sea witch, risk being caught *again* on my way out, and

return to this place in hopes that she *might* be able to help me, all of which meant quite possibly never seeing Colin again. Not even to say goodbye.

As I left the ship and made my way out of the trench, I debated my two options. One guaranteed me a single chance to see Colin one last time. The other held a glimmer of hope that we could be together, but a significant risk of never seeing him again at all. Saying goodbye would break both our hearts, but what if I disappeared without a word? I'd hurt him more than if I told him I had to leave, and I'd never forgive myself.

*So what do I do now?*

# Chapter Eleven

# COLIN

As I made my coffee and got ready to go to work, I glanced out at the dock because hope sprang eternal. There was no shell. There hadn't been one when I'd come home yesterday, either, and none when I'd looked out one last time before bed.

It had been four days since I'd seen Lir, and I didn't care how pathetic I was for admitting it—I missed him. I was also worried this meant he wasn't coming back. He'd mentioned a few times that if his people found out where he was going, they might not let him leave. Was that what had happened? Was he stuck down there? Or was he—

The door opened, and I jumped out of my skin.

"Colin?" Mom called out. "Are you home?"

I rolled my eyes. Was knocking really too much to ask? "I am, but I'm naked with another guy."

Her high heels clomped angrily down the hall, and she appeared in the kitchen, arms folded across her chest and a sour look on her face. "That isn't funny."

I shrugged indifferently and sipped my coffee. I'd felt guilty for a long time about being snide with my mom, but with her boundary issues and the way she acted about me being gay, and just everything, I'd stopped feeling bad about it.

"So." She faced me. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

*Oh, this sounded like fun.*

"Yeah?" I put my coffee cup down. "What's up?"

"Well, I heard through the grapevine that your employers made a stink about Wes Martin." She glared at me. "Saying he and his friends aren't

welcome at that lobster restaurant, and it sounds like that has something to do with you."

I suppressed a shudder. "Yeah. It does."

Mom pressed her lips together. "Do you know what that does to your family's image? People think we're throwing our name around and having people banned from public—"

"*Mom*." It was a struggle and a half not to blow up at her. "Joan and Haley have every right to ban people from their lobster pound, especially people who are openly homophobic. You know, since they're gay too?" She squirmed a little, because of course she did. "For God's sake, the guys they banned *tried to kill me*."

Her features hardened. Tightening her arms across her chest, she watched me expectantly, as if this was my cue to explain how someone trying to murder me was grounds for banning them from the place where I worked.

I didn't take the bait. Instead, I held my breath and watched her, waiting for her to put the pieces together herself. I tried not to cling to the hope that she'd finally understand why I needed my parents' support. There were enough homophobes out there—dangerous ones—and I needed to know my family had my back.

*They tried to kill me, Mom. Do you get it now?*

After a long, uncomfortable moment, she dropped her hands to her sides and huffed impatiently. "I don't know what you want me to say. Things like this—This is exactly why your father and I wanted you to be discreet."

I blinked, though I didn't know why I still bothered being surprised. "Seriously?"

"Yes! You know damn well there are people who don't like men being gay, and advertising that you are is painting a target on your back."

"You sure you're not just worried because I'm painting a target on the family's good name?"

She glared at me. "Stop it. Yes, I want you to be discreet because I don't think a person should be broadcasting something like…" She wrinkled her nose. "But I also worry about you. You're my son, and—"

"And everything I do reflects on the family."

Mom scowled. "That's beside the point right now."

"But it's still a point. That's all you and Dad have harped on since I came out. It was never about my safety, or you worrying about me, or

anything. It was all about how this would reflect on the Everroad name and reputation." I gritted my teeth. "But hey, now that someone's tried to kill me because of it, you can conveniently use that as a reason to tell me to shut up about being gay. How's that? Am I close?"

"Enough." She narrowed her eyes. "A family as high-profile and influential as ours *has* to care about its reputation, but that doesn't mean I want anything happening to my son. What I'm saying is that no good comes out of you telling the world that—"

"Telling the world who I am? Being honest about the fact that I love men the way straight guys love women?"

"Love." She rolled her eyes. "We're not having this discussion again, Colin. Two men don't *love* each other. It's—"

"No, we're not having this discussion," I growled. Especially not now—I was *way* too raw over Lir to talk about this. "In fact, we're not having any discussion. I need to get to work."

She exhaled hard. "Colin. Would you listen to me?" She stepped closer and cupped my face. "Someone tried to kill you. I'm worried. I don't want you going back to that place if—"

I sidestepped her and picked up my wallet and keys off the counter. "You want me to be a good little straight boy. Have you noticed that in this entire conversation or at dinner the other night, you haven't once suggested going to the police? Or asked if I have or why I haven't?"

Her eyes widened. "Have you?"

"No. Because I have no proof." It was hard to speak around the lump in my throat, but I pushed on. "I can prove that someone disabled the boat on purpose, but I can't prove it was them. It's all their word—all four of them—against mine. So the four men who tried to kill me are still out there, the cops aren't involved, and you—" My voice cracked. I cleared my throat, then added, "You just want to remind me to shut the hell up about being gay."

"Because I want you to be *safe*." She threw up her hands in an exasperated gesture.

"You want your name to be safe."

She glared at me, then sighed. "We're not going to discuss this now. Not when you won't listen to what I'm saying."

I shrugged because if I said a single word, I was going to break down, and I didn't need to have *that* conversation either.

*Men cry, Mom. Get over it.*

*Especially when they love someone who probably isn't coming back.*

*Jesus, Mom—I can't even tell you I love someone, or that I'm hurting because he's gone.*

She stood straighter and pushed her shoulders back. "We'll talk about this later."

With that, she stomped out of the kitchen. A moment later, the guesthouse door slammed.

I sagged against the counter and rubbed a hand over my face. I'd wondered for a while now if I should just tell my parents the truth about what happened on the boat, but I'd kept talking myself out of it. Apparently I should've continued that pattern, because yeah, it turned out it hurt like hell, hearing your mom say no one would've tried to murder you if you'd stayed in the closet like a good boy.

Sighing, I gazed out at the dock, and the ache in my heart intensified.

Still no shell.

*Come back, Lir.*

*I miss having someone who knows how to love me.*

*I miss having someone who* wants *to*.

# Chapter Twelve

# LIR

Getting back into the city without detection was easy. Getting into the palace and my own chamber? *That* was going to be trickier.

I didn't go for the side entrance this time. That would be too obvious to anyone who was watching for me to come sneaking in.

Instead, I swam in through the main entrance in plain view. I moved casually and in no hurry, same as I did any time I returned from simply being out and about with friends.

And I'd barely made it down the first corridor before my sister appeared in front of me.

"Where have you been?" Cascade demanded. "You disappeared on me, and no one has seen you since. Where were you?"

I smirked. "So you admit you were keeping an eye on me?"

Her jaw worked. "Where were you, Lir?"

I rolled my eyes and showed my palms. "I just went out swimming. I didn't go to the surface."

"Out swimming? *Where?*"

"Just…" I gestured over my shoulder. "Out in the open sea. I needed to be by myself for a little while."

"And you couldn't tell me that? You had to take off and—"

"Tell you?" I laughed. "Are you saying you would have let me out of your sight?"

Cascade scowled. "It doesn't look good when you just disappear like that."

"Maybe not, but when you or Caspian are always looking over my shoulder, what choice do I have if I want to—"

“You brought this on yourself, Lir,” she snapped. “Don’t blame us for __”

“Maybe I did,” I growled back. “But I told Mother I wouldn’t return to the surface, and I haven’t. I went out to the open sea just like you and Caspian and even Mother and Father do all the time.” I narrowed my eyes. “If I’d gone to the surface, I would’ve been caught, wouldn’t I? I mean, you don’t think I’d have made it anywhere near the top before someone stopped me, do you?”

She pursed her lips, and frustration tightened my gut. I’d suspected other mer were watching me and that sentries had likely been posted to catch me if I headed for the surface. My sister’s reaction told me I wasn’t far from the truth.

I would have to be very careful leaving the palace, and even more careful heading to the surface from the sea witch’s lair.

“I didn’t go to the surface,” I calmly reminded my sister. “Now do you mind if I go get some sleep?”

She glared at me, but then she moved aside. As I swam past her, she called out, “You know we’re only trying to keep you safe, don’t you?”

“I know,” I said over my shoulder and kept swimming. And I really did understand. I just wished *they* could understand why the surface called to me these days.

When I reached my chamber, I went inside and closed the hatch. Then I paused to listen. The corridor was still and silent except for the steady current.

Certain I was alone, I crossed the chamber, and I plucked a rusted piece of metal from a crevice in the rock. Cradling it in my hands, I gazed at it. There had been a time when I’d have balked at giving up this treasured possession. In exchange for being with Colin? I didn’t even need to think about it.

All I had to do now was get back to the shipwreck and return this to the sea witch.

I was nervous, of course. Everyone in the ocean knew that the sea witch was not above trickery, but I could think of no one else who could possibly send me closer to Colin’s world. I just hoped she really had some means of letting us be together. She was known for her powerful magic, after all. If anyone could do it, it was her.

If she couldn’t…

If she *wouldn't*…

Well, that wasn't something I could think about right now.

I waited awhile, giving everyone time to lose interest in me or my movements. Once I left this chamber, once I made it clear I intended to leave the palace, there would be no turning back and no second chances.

I looked down at the metal fragment. Would it really be enough to persuade the sea witch to help me?

Only one way to find out.

I left my chamber and casually followed the corridor. If I rushed now, I'd raise suspicion, so despite wanting to zip through the tunnels like a terrified minnow with a shark on its tailfins, I swam a lazy path through the main corridor to where it branched in three different directions. There, I glanced around, made sure I was alone, and then followed the branch to the right.

Now, I picked up speed. There wasn't much down this way except access points used almost exclusively by sentries, and if anyone saw me at all, they'd get suspicious no matter how fast I was going. The less time I spent down here, the better. Just had to make it to—

"Lir!" My brother's voice boomed through the corridor from behind me. "Lir! Where are you going?"

"Curse it," I muttered, and flipped my tail harder.

"Damn it, Lir!" he bellowed after me. "Come back at once!"

I swam fast, clutching the metal fragment as I whipped through the tunnel. I ignored the pounding of my heart, the fear, the certainty I was going to be caught, and I followed the fish-lit twists and turns to one of the side entrances while my brother's voice faded behind me.

Up ahead, the entrance came into view, but as I hurried toward it, a shadow darkened the opening. A sentry. Curse it.

I gritted my teeth and swam harder. If I turned back now, my brother would see to it I never left his sight. This was the one and only chance I would ever have.

The sentry spread his arms. "Stop! You can't go out this way. I said stop!"

I didn't stop. I swam right toward him, right for his chest as if I planned to crash headlong into him and shove him out into the sea.

At the last possible moment, I darted down and to the left, and while the sentry was fast, he wasn't fast enough to stop me from shooting through the

gap beside his tail. My own tailfin clipped the stone, but I didn’t allow myself so much as a flinch. With the sentry and Caspian right behind me, I swam faster and harder than I ever had in my life.

“Stop him!” Caspian called. “Don’t let him leave the city!”

Immediately, several mer swam in from all sides, ready to block or grab me.

I pointed frantically up ahead. “That way! He’s almost to the edge of the city!”

Just as I’d hoped, they turned and darted in the direction I’d indicated.

As soon as they did, I shot to the left and into the waving seaweed anchored to scattered boulders. Above me, Caspian and the sentry shouted after the mer I’d fooled.

I didn’t look back or slow down. I barely heard a thing over the blood pounding in my ears and the water rushing past me as I swept through the rocks and seaweed. The gaps between rocks were narrower down here, something I’d gleefully exploited when we were playing as children—being smaller than my friends and siblings had its advantages sometimes. Now, as an adult, the gaps and crevices were tighter than they’d been in my youth, and I scraped my skin and scales several times as I made my way through.

Caspian and the sentry? They’d never fit.

By the time I reached the other end, I had scrapes and cuts stinging from my shoulders down to my tailfins, but I didn’t care. I swam on, and I kept swimming until my muscles were trembling and my gills could barely keep up.

Then and only then, I chanced a look over my shoulder. Caspian was nowhere in sight. I turned around fully and scanned the sea, but he was gone. So were the sentries and everyone else who’d been pursuing me.

There was no telling how long that would last, though, so I didn’t wait around. I continued toward the sea witch’s lair.

My heart beat faster when the trench came into view. This time, I didn’t hesitate at its lip—I dove past it, flipped my tailfins a few times, and surged downward toward the shadowy shipwreck.

Some of the fear from my youth tingled along my spine as I approached the entrance, but I ignored it just as I was ignoring the fatigue in my body and the burning where I’d cut myself on the rocks. If ever there was a time I had to be fearless—or at least pretend to be—this was it.

I cautiously entered the shipwreck. “Hello?” I called out. “I’ve come back.”

“Did you bring what I asked for?”

I turned toward the sound of her voice, and my spine prickled as she emerged from the shadows, dark eyes fixed on me and black hair dancing in the current beside her face and shoulders.

I swallowed, then held up the piece of metal. “Yes. I brought it.”

Her gaze went right to it, and she smiled as she gently took it from my hands. For a moment, she was silent and still, simply cradling the shard of crumbling metal like it was the greatest treasure she’d ever seen. Then she released it, gave it a gentle swish with her hand, and it tumbled through the water to the place it had once been. When it met the hull, there was a brief flicker of golden light between its edge and the rest of the metal, and then the light darkened, leaving the piece fixed in place more firmly than it had been the day I’d taken it.

For a moment, she stared at the spot, a soft smile on her lips. “Much better. It’s never looked quite right since that piece was taken.”

Guilt prodded at me. “Sorry.”

“It’s back where it belongs now. That’s what matters.”

I wasn’t sure what to say.

Then the sea witch held up her hand, and two cords dangled from her fingers and swayed in the current. At the ends of the cords were glass vials, one containing an amber liquid, the other green. Indicating the amber vial, she said, “This will change you into a land man. The other, back into a mer.”

My jaw fell open. “It’ll change me… Really? I can…” I stared at the vials. I had no idea what I’d hoped for, what magic she might have that could let me be closer to Colin, but this? Giving me legs and letting me walk on land with him? I’d never imagined wanting to give up my tail, but now that the option was in front of me, it was all I could do not to snatch the vial away and drink its contents right here and now.

*I can be a land man. We can be together. I can be with him!*

The sea witch pointed sharply at me. “Listen to me—do *not* drink this until you’re at the surface, or you’ll drown long before you reach the air. When it takes effect, you’ll be a land person, just like your love.”

I blinked, still disbelieving this was possible. “I will?”

“Yes. And many mer before you have drunk it too eagerly and drowned right here in my cave. Don’t be stupid.”

Nodding, I murmured, “Right. Right. I won’t.”

She held up her finger. “And there are two very important things you need to remember. One, you’ll have until the sun goes down on the third day to drink this”—she gestured at the second vial—“or you’ll be a land man forever. And don’t think you can find some loophole or spell that will override it and change you back to a mer. Once the sun sets on the third day, you are a land man. *No* magic will give you a tail or gills again. End of story. If you do drink it, you will return to your mer form forever. Got it?”

“Yes. Yes. Understood.”

“The second thing.” She closed her fingers around both vials and looked me in the eyes. “As long as you’re a land person, you won’t be able to speak.”

“I… What?”

She sighed dramatically. “It’s part of the agreement between the mer and the land people. From back when they agreed to leave us in peace.”

“But why? I don’t understand.”

“Because the land people still believe we’re sirens.” She must have seen the unchanged confusion in my face, because she continued, “They have legends that merfolk would sing to enchant sailors and make them crash their boats on the rocks.”

“*Did* we do that?”

“As a rule? No.” She rolled her eyes. “But one troublemaking mermaid drowns a few sailors, and suddenly we’re all dangerous. The land people know that mer will occasionally use magic to walk among them, and they’re afraid a mer will take human form and lure them to sea and…” She waved her hand. “The point is, there was a treaty signed between them and us, and because of that treaty, any mer who go to land must be silent.”

I’d heard the stories about land people thinking we were sirens. There’d also been the odd story of a mer going to shore and being unable to speak, and I’d always wondered why they’d been mute. I’d never actually seen the treaty signed between their people and ours, but strangely enough, I could believe that there was something in there about silencing us so we didn’t use our siren powers on them. Though now I was kind of curious about whether those siren powers actually worked. Something to try before I drank the potion and became a land person?

No, because that would be more time away from Colin. It had already been too long since I'd seen him, and now I had the chance to be with him in ways I'd only dreamed of.

"All right." I held out my hand. "Thank you."

She hesitated but then hung the two vials from my outstretched fingers. "Be careful up there, Lir. Even if he loves you back all three days, staying past sundown means you're wagering your entire world that his love won't fade after the fourth."

"I know." I closed my hand around the strings, then draped them around my neck. "One way or the other, I have to see him again, and this is the only way."

She smiled, and it was surprisingly genuine, given everything I'd heard about the sea witch. "Good luck, then."

"Thank you." I paused. "And thank you for…" I touched the vials.

"You're welcome. Thank you for returning…" She nodded toward the mended hull.

"You're welcome. Sorry I took it."

She laughed, shaking her head. "I know it's just the silly games of mer youth. Now go." The sea witch waved toward the entrance. "Go be with your land man."

I nodded, flashed her a smile, and swam out of the shipwreck.

As I rose from the trench, my heart thundered. I didn't care about the sun setting on the third day. If Colin would have me, I'd stay on land with him forever.

Even if I never spoke another word.

# Chapter Thirteen

# COLIN

On my way into the guesthouse, I felt like I'd just worked three shifts at the lobster pound instead of one. That had kind of become my default setting. I hadn't seen Lir in days, and I was less and less optimistic that I was going to see him again. Maybe this meant his family had succeeded in keeping him under the sea. Or maybe he was just keeping a low profile until they stopped paying attention.

All I knew was that I missed him. Our encounters at the end of the dock had become such a regular part of my life that I was completely adrift without them. Without him. I wasn't sure if that made me pathetic or what, but it didn't really matter—I missed wandering out to the end of the dock, forgetting about my toxic family and my homophobic world, and diving headlong into conversation with someone who came from a completely different world, but somehow understood me. Maybe he didn't get all the nuances of being a land person, and maybe some of my pop culture references and slang were lost on him, but he got me, and I craved that.

I left my wallet and keys on the counter, and because hope stubbornly continued to spring eternal, I did the same thing I did every time I came home—I looked out the kitchen window to see if there was a shell on the dock.

And there *was*.

My pulse jumped and I was scrambling for the back door before I could think twice. I didn't care if it made me desperate—hell, I *was* desperate. I jogged down the dock, ready to drop onto my knees at the end and call out to Lir, but—

But he was already there.

“Lir,” I murmured, and knelt on the edge.

He pushed himself up, and the instant our lips met, the my days-long pity party became a distant memory. One needy, long overdue kiss, and my world was right again.

I curved my hand behind his neck, fingers tangling in his long, wet hair. I rested my forehead against his and panted, “I was afraid you weren’t coming back.”

“I wanted to.” He touched my face with a cool hand. “I didn’t stay away by choice.”

“You’re here, though. That’s all I care about.”

He smiled flicker fast, but then turned serious. “Listen.” He lowered himself a little, and put his hand over mine as he looked right in my eyes. “There’s a way we can be together. On land.”

“On… What? How?”

“I can be with you.” He gestured at two vials hanging from his neck. “One of these will change me into a land man.”

All the breath rushed out of my lungs. “It will? Really?”

Lir nodded. “The other will change me back.”

“That’s… You’re serious. And you’d want to? Be a land man, I mean?”

“Of course.” He squeezed my hand and smiled up at me. “Just being away from you as long as I have has been miserable.”

“Yeah, I’ve been losing my mind.” I ran my thumb alongside his hand. “But I don’t want to pull you away from your whole life. I… Are you sure about this?”

“Yes. Except…” He stared down at our hands for a moment.

“Tell me,” I whispered. “Let’s talk about this. All of it. Before you make the decision.”

He hesitated, then looked up at me again. “All right, well, if I don’t change back by sunset on the third day, then I can’t change back. At all. Ever.” He swallowed hard and seemed to be struggling to hold my gaze. “But if I do change back and return to my world, then… then I probably won’t be able to see you again.” His shoulders sank. “In fact, I’m sure I won’t.”

“Why not?” Beat. “Your family.”

Lir nodded. “They’re…” He made a frustrated sound and shook his head. “They’ve made it clear that if I come back to the surface, it’ll be the last time. It was all I could do to slip away this time. I won’t be able to

again. Especially not after someone finds out I've been to see the sea witch."

"The sea—" I flicked my eyes toward the vials around his neck. "*Oh.*"

He shrugged almost apologetically. "There was no one else I could ask."

"And with your family…" I swallowed. "So it's now or never, isn't it? We either do this now, or we don't see each other again."

Frowning, Lir nodded. "Unfortunately, yes. And there's, um… There's one other thing."

I inclined my head.

Lir chewed his lip. "As a land man, I won't be able to speak."

I blinked. "What?"

"It's…" He waved a hand, sending a few droplets sprinkling into the water beside him. "Something to do with land people being afraid that we're sirens and will use our voices to enchant humans into crashing on rocks and drowning."

I nodded. "Oh. Right. I've heard the stories about sirens. You don't do that, though, right?"

A little grin played at his lips, and he trailed a fingertip up my forearm. "If you'll recall, we met because I was doing my best to *keep* you from crashing on rocks or drowning."

"Good point," I whispered, the goose bumps on my arm taking my breath away. I searched his eyes. "So, do you want to do this? Come to land and—"

"Yes." Lir didn't even hesitate. "I want to be with you, Colin. Even if I can't speak, and it means getting used to a whole new body…" He brought my hand up and kissed my palm. "Giving up my tail is a lot more appealing than giving up, well, this."

Staring at him in disbelief, I whispered, "But it's not just your tail. Your whole world… Your family…"

"I know." He pushed himself up and brushed a kiss across my lips. "And if I didn't have to choose between the two, I wouldn't. But my family is making me choose." He cupped my cheek, cool fingertips drifting over my skin. "If they're going to demand that I choose, then I'm going to follow my heart, and my heart keeps bringing me back to you."

My own heart melted. "Really?"

"Yes." He looked in my eyes. "Do you want me to—"

“Yes, of course. By all means.” I paused. “And…after three days, if this isn’t what you want…” *If I’m not what you want*. I caressed his smooth cheek. “Then you can go back, right?”

Lir nodded. “Yes.” He tilted his head. “Do you want me to leave after those three days?”

“No, not at all. Of course I want to be with you. But the thing I want more than anything is for you to be happy. If being here with me makes you happy?” I tipped up his chin and kissed him. “Then yes. Come be with me. And I’ll understand if you want to go home at the end.”

Lir smiled against my lips. He kissed me once more, then drew back a little, and he pulled one of the vials off his neck. As he moved, a couple of icy droplets landed on my hand, and the chill gave me pause.

“Wait.”

He froze, capped vial still in his hand.

“When you change, you’re going to be human, and you’ll be wet, so you’ll probably be cold as hell.” I gestured over my shoulder. “Let me grab something so you can stay warm.”

“Oh.” Lir blinked. Then he nodded. “All right. Of course.”

I got up and jogged back into the guesthouse, heart going a million miles a minute. Lir was coming out of the water? He’d be… We could… God, my brain couldn’t process it all.

At least I had the presence of mind to make sure he didn’t freeze. As soon as I was in the guest house, I pulled three huge fluffy towels from the linen closet. As I did, a memory flashed through my mind of the couple who’d pulled me out of the water after the storm and the sun-warmed towels they’d wrapped around my shoulders. That all seemed like a lifetime ago.

I shook myself, and for a second, I debated putting the towels in the dryer for a couple of minutes to make sure they were warm, but that was probably overkill. Besides, I didn’t want to waste any time—it was already mid-afternoon, and we only had until the sun went down three days from now.

So I hurried back outside with the towels. On the way, I paused, eyes flicking toward the hot tub on the deck. Maybe that would make it easier for him to adjust to his new body? Still in water, but not freezing like he would be in the Atlantic?

Just in case, I quickly checked the temperature, which I always kept a little lower than normal so I wouldn't overheat, and then I headed down the dock to meet Lir.

"These will keep you warm," I panted as I set the towels down. "No point in letting you freeze, right?"

He smiled. "Thank you." Then he planted his hands on the dock, and this time he hoisted himself all the way out of the water. I couldn't help staring at him. It was the first time I'd ever seen him from head to… well, tail. He had some cuts and scrapes that looked fairly fresh, but they weren't bleeding and he didn't seem concerned about them, so I wasn't either. The rest of him… Whoa. The shimmery scales and his long, iridescent fins—I could have stared at them all day. Holy shit, he was beautiful. It almost seemed criminal to ask him to trade that body for gangly legs and skin that complained about everything.

I crouched in front of him and touched his face. "Are you really sure about this?

"Absolutely." He trailed wet fingers down my cheek. "I can finally be close to you. That's worth giving up my voice."

I kissed him softly. "No pressure, right?"

"None at all." His lips brushed mine again, and then he drew back and gestured with the vial. "I'm ready if you are."

"More than ready."

He tugged the cap free and brought the little bottle to his lips. He hesitated, his expression unreadable, and I was about to suggest that if he wasn't entirely sure, we could think about this longer. But before I could, he threw it back like a shot and swallowed it with a grimace.

As he lowered the vial, our eyes met.

My heart pounded. "So, um, how long does it take to—"

Lir tensed all over. His skin took on a shimmer that had nothing to do with the afternoon sun. In seconds, it was bright enough I had to look away and blink a few times. Squinting and looking through my fingers, I tried to see what was happening, but it was only when the light began to fade that I could see that his tail had become two legs, and his fins and scales had vanished in favor of smooth human skin.

On his sides, the iridescent gills clamped down and then vanished, and panic widened Lir's eyes, as if he couldn't figure out how to breathe now that his gills were gone.

“Lir.” Still squinting against the light, I cupped his face in both hands. “Look at me.”

He did, and I emphatically drew in a breath, then released it. He tried to do the same, but the panic intensified.

“Pull in the air from right here.” I touched the middle of his chest. “Same as you do when you’re going to speak. It’ll come to you, I promise.”

Lir tried, obviously struggling, but then something must have clicked because he sucked in a breath, and his eyes slid closed as a shudder of obvious relief ran through him. He sagged against me, and I stroked his long wet hair as he took some deep breaths.

After a while, he stilled, and the glow dimmed, and it was just the two of us in the afternoon sun. Just me and…

And a very human Lir.

I swallowed. “Are you okay?”

Lir took a few more breaths. After a moment, he lifted his head and met my gaze, and he nodded, and… My God, I was just mesmerized by him. Dark strings of wet hair tumbled into his face, over eyes that were more human than mer now but were the same rich green. His land complexion was… Mediterranean, I supposed. Olive skin. Dark hair and lashes. Only the slightly-too-vivid-for-a-human blue-green of his eyes gave away that he’d ever been a mer. Human, mer, whatever—he was absolutely beautiful.

He hugged himself as he started to shiver.

I immediately grabbed one of the towels I’d forgotten about, draped it around his shoulders, and wrapped my arms around him so some of my body heat might go through the terrycloth. “Better?”

Lir nodded.

“There’s a hot tub up by the house.” I paused and quickly realized he wouldn’t have a clue what that meant. “It’s full of water. Big enough for both of us. But it’s warm.”

Lir looked up at me, and his eyebrows rose.

“It might, you know, give you a chance to warm up and get used to…” I gestured at his legs.

He glanced down, then back up at me, and he nodded. Gesturing at his legs, he shrugged apologetically, which I took to mean he wasn’t sure how to use them yet.

“We’ll take it slow walking. It’s not very far, though.” I moved to a crouch. “Here, put your arm around my shoulders.”

He did, and I wrapped mine around him, carefully keeping the towel in place.

“Okay, I’m going to stand, but I’m going to go slow. Just lean on me if you need to. I promise I won’t let you fall.”

He nodded, and we started to get up, but he gasped.

“What? You okay?”

Grimacing, he gestured at his side.

I indulged in a playful chuckle. “Oh, yeah. Hurts when the gills go away.” I pressed a kiss to his temple. “It’ll fade.”

He nodded again as if to say he understood, and I carefully eased him to his feet. He swayed a little and held on tight. Upright, standing mostly straight, he was a few inches shorter than me and narrower in the shoulders. Somehow that surprised me, but what *wasn’t* surprising about having Lir out of the water and on legs?

As we started carefully moving up the dock, I shot a wary glance at the big house and hoped no one happened to look this way until Lir and I had disappeared behind the guesthouse. At least if we were in the hot tub, I’d hear my mother coming before she had a chance to sneak up on us. God, wouldn’t that put a damper on all of this—my mother appearing with her attitudes and opinions while I was trying to lose myself with Lir.

Well, I wouldn’t worry about her right now.

For the moment, my priority was getting Lir warm and comfortable.

# Chapter Fourteen

# LIR

Legs were strange. If not for Colin letting me lean on him, I wouldn't have been able to stand, never mind walk.

He didn't rush, though. He let me find my balance, and he kept a strong arm around me as I tentatively took every step. I'd seen him walk up and down the dock dozens of times, and it had seemed so simple, but each step was a complex series of movements with joints that hadn't existed until a moment ago. I'd only have three days in this body? I was going to spend that entire time learning to walk. Assuming my new muscles and joints could cope—they already ached with fatigue.

"You doing all right?" Colin asked.

I nodded. As long as he didn't let go, I'd be fine, and nothing about the way he held me said he was going to. I was thankful for that, and also for the towels he'd brought out in case I was cold. My land person form was cold, and the warmth from the towels and his body kept me from shivering too much to walk.

After ages, we reached the land end of the dock, and the ground changed to stone interspersed with green plants. Grass, I thought he'd called it. The stone was coarse beneath these soft feet, and the grass was ticklish when it brushed my skin.

"Not much farther." Colin gestured up ahead at what looked like another dock attached to the house. A deck, if I remembered right. There were a couple of stairs, which were even more complicated to navigate than just walking on flat land, but we made it.

He guided me to a small pool of clear bluish water with steam rising from its surface. "Let me know if the water's too hot for you. I can turn it

down.”

The small pool smelled odd, but when I touched the water, it was pleasantly warm, so I nodded.

“Okay.” Colin looked around, brow furrowed with concentration. “Let me, um… You know, it might be easier if we get in together. Just let me…” He tugged at his shirt.

I shrugged. Colin helped me sit in a chair beside the pool, and then he stripped off his clothes. My heart sped up as I stole a moment to look him up and down and take in the sight of that beautiful body that had always been covered. He was taller than I was, with broader shoulders and light hair in places where mine was dark. Why did land people have to keep themselves covered all the time? He was gorgeous.

Colin met my gaze, and he blushed. “Um. I…” He laughed, shaking his head. “Let me help you get in.”

It was awkward, getting up the small steps and over the edge of the pool, but with his help, I managed, hissing softly at the intense heat against my sensitive new skin.

“Are you sure it isn’t too hot?” he asked. “I can turn it down.”

I shook my head. Water this hot was strange, but it felt nice, and my skin quickly adjusted as we moved deeper into the water. There were ledges carved into the pool for us to sit, and sitting down meant submerging to a little below my chin and the tops of Colin’s shoulders.

He was right about the hot water, too. It was perfect while I adapted to this new body. The water in the shallow pool wasn’t salty, and the heat was strange, but it eased the ache in my new joints and muscles as I experimentally stretched and flexed them. My new body wasn’t buoyant the same way my mer body was, but this was easier than trying to maneuver on land.

After a while, I tried getting to my feet, which wasn’t as difficult in water. Maybe because it was more familiar to me. I was used to the way it felt to move my arms in water, and somehow that made moving my legs less alien as well. Gradually, the fatigue eased too, and my new joints and muscles didn’t ache so much.

Colin sat up, keeping his arms outstretched in case I needed something to grab onto while I found my balance. After a while, he asked, “Is this helping? The water?”

I looked at him and smiled. Nodding, I sat down beside him and mouthed, *Thank you.*

He smiled back and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Do you feel all right? If you want to get out, or it gets too hot, just—”

I pressed my lips to his, and he moaned into my kiss. I slid a hand up into his hair. Then he wrapped his arms around me. After a while, I realized we were shifting, and I broke the kiss with a gasp of panic, but when I saw his smile, I relaxed. And as he eased me down, I realized we were facing each other now, my new knees straddling his thighs. Oh, yes. How many times had I fantasized about being skin to skin with Colin? I’d still had a tail in those fantasies, but it didn’t matter—we were finally in the same world together, and he was kissing me and holding me and this was perfect. It was everything. Now that I had him in my arms, I marveled that I hadn’t lost my mind when he’d been on land and I’d been in the sea. This was how we were meant to be together. I could feel it. We belonged in the same world so we could be just like this all the time.

“We don’t have to jump right into anything,” he panted between kisses. “You’re still getting used to your body, and I mean, if you’d rather—”

I claimed a deeper kiss, and from the way he relaxed against me, he got the message—maybe I was in a new body, but I’d been aching for him all this time, and we only had three days, so I wasn’t going to waste a moment. I’d figure out as we went how land people coupled. The mechanics didn’t matter—I just wanted him every way I could have him.

I leaned into him, and shivered as something below my waist brushed his body, igniting delicious sensations that reminded me of those times I’d coupled with other mer. And though it was overwhelming, the only thing more overwhelming was the need to do it more. To do whatever it took to keep feeling this way.

“Whatever magic you used,” he murmured, “it gave you a nice cock.”

I met his gaze and tilted my head.

Grinning, he let his fingers drift downward, and I gasped when they trailed across the thick hardness. “This.” He closed his fingers around it and gave a long, gentle stroke. “It’s nice. Perfect, actually.”

I bit my lip as he stroked me again. With no conscious thought from me, my hips rocked, pushing my cock through Colin’s hand, and he asked in a low growl, “Like that?”

As if he needed to ask, but I nodded anyway. Then I looked down, and through the rippling surface, I could see that he was in a similar state, his cock long and thick against his belly.

Experimentally, I reached down and followed his lead—wrapping my fingers around his cock and stroking it slowly.

He let his head fall back, and he squeezed his eyes shut as he groaned. “God, yeah…”

The way he’d tilted his head exposed the side of his throat, and I couldn’t resist leaning in to kiss that tantalizing skin. He gasped, and his fingers twitched on my cock, and as I kissed his neck again, he whispered, “Fuck, *yes*.”

I wished I could tell him how good this felt. Not just what his hand was doing, but everything. Being with him. Before today, the only bridges between our worlds had been our hands and those long, indulgent kisses, and now… *This*. Our bodies pressed close together. Hands sliding over skin we’d never had a chance to explore. I hadn’t even let myself fantasize about this because it was impossible, but now it was *real*.

“I have an idea,” Colin said breathlessly. “Sit up on the side.” He tapped the pool’s edge beside his shoulder.

I had no idea what he had in mind, but I was perfectly willing to follow his lead, so I nodded. I moved slowly and a bit clumsily but managed, with Colin’s support, to perch on the side. He stood, facing me, and put his hands on the edge on either side of me.

“Now you’re in the perfect position,” he said with a grin before kissing me softly. “And ironically, this is one of those times it would be nice for *me* to have gills. But since I don’t…” He lowered himself partway into the water, and he started stroking me again, but this time—

I had to grab the edge for balance as he ran the tip of his tongue around my cock. Before I’d even caught my breath, he took me farther into his mouth, teasing all over the sensitive flesh as the world spun around me. Every sensation on this new body was strange and intense, but the wet heat of Colin’s lips and tongue were dizzying. I kept a hand on the edge of the pool, the other on his shoulder, and my whole body responded to every lick and touch.

And just like he did when we were kissing, he groaned low in his throat so I felt it more than heard it, and maybe I’d never climaxed in this body

before, maybe I'd never felt my toes curling or my knees trembling, but I knew that delicious build and the hunger for release.

I wanted so badly to say his name, to whisper, *"Yes, Colin,"* but somehow I was certain that even if I still had my voice, I wouldn't have been able to speak. Not as he drove me higher, groaning around my cock as if he were the one being pleasured. It would take time to get used to navigating in this body, but this? Oh, I didn't need to adjust to this. I surrendered to it, and all at once, a million sensations exploded through me. My hips tried to jerk even as Colin kept me still, and he moaned the way I only wished I could as my climax—my first ever as a land man—surged through me.

When it was over, I shuddered hard and slumped back, holding myself up on shaking arms as I stared down at Colin.

He lifted his head and swept his tongue across his slightly swollen lips. "I've been wanting to do that forever." He rose and leaned in to kiss me, but hesitated. "Uh, you might… The taste…" He gestured at his mouth. "Cum might taste… um…"

Grinning, I curved my hand behind his head, pulled him all the way in, and kissed him deeply. The taste—cum, apparently—was new, yes, but unpleasant? Hardly. The vague saltiness only served to remind me of the pleasure he'd just given me, and I wanted more. Colin eased me down into the hot water, and as he pulled me closer and his thick cock rubbed against me, I didn't just want more—I wanted to reciprocate. I wanted to hear and feel and, yes, taste Colin in the same ecstasy I'd been in a moment ago.

I wrapped my fingers around his cock, and he gasped.

"Fuck…" He touched his forehead to mine. "This is real, right? I'm not imagining it?"

Of course I couldn't say a word, so I just kissed him, and he gave one of those low moans that aroused me so much.

"We shouldn't stay out here too long," he said between kisses. "The water… It'll get uncomfortable after a while."

Water? Uncomfortable? Oh, right. We were land people.

I met his eyes and shrugged.

"Let's go inside and out of the heat." Colin smiled. "You can still lean on me. Same as when we came in off the dock." He squirmed as I gave him another stroke. "And then we can… We can finish this."

I nodded because damn it, I couldn't say, "*Yes, let's do that right now.*" I could, however, walk. Sort of. I was stronger and steadier in this body than I'd been earlier, but I probably would need to lean on him this time after the way he'd weakened my knees with that climax.

Moving slowly and carefully, we got up out of the pool and went into the house. The air was cooler in here, a steady breeze flowing through the rooms, and I shivered. Colin adjusted the towel around my shoulders, which helped a little.

As we continued through the house, a seashell caught my eye. Not just because it was odd to see a shell this far from the water, but because the shell looked familiar. As did the one next to it. And the one next to that. And…

I halted, if a bit clumsily.

Colin studied me. "What's wrong?"

I studied the shells. Three long, neat rows were lined up beneath the window. As my gaze moved from one to the next, I recognized each and every shell.

Lips parted, I looked up at him and gestured at the shells, raising my eyebrows and hoping my question came through clearly.

Colin glanced at them, then at me, and some renewed pink bloomed in his cheeks. "I, um… I kept all of them." He laughed self-consciously, the blush deepening. "I know, it's kind of stupid, but I—"

I put my finger to his lips and shook my head. Then I lowered my hand and kissed him, and I hoped my kiss told him how sweet it was that he'd kept them all. Because even if I'd been able to speak right then, I wouldn't have been able to put into words why it meant so much to me that he'd kept all the shells I'd left on the dock to signal to him that I was nearby. Maybe there weren't words for it. Maybe there didn't need to be.

Colin broke the kiss and met my gaze, a soft, dreamy look in his eyes. "You don't think it's weird?" He stroked my hair. "That I kept them?"

I shook my head again and wrapped my arms around his neck. I kissed him gently, and he seemed to take that as reassurance that, no, I didn't think it was weird. He relaxed into my embrace and my kiss, the sudden tension disappearing as quickly as it had come.

When he broke the kiss this time, he kept his arm around my shoulder and led me into another room. In the middle was a wide, flat piece of furniture.

“Here,” Colin said. “The bed will probably be more comfortable until you get the hang of moving.” Bed. Right. He’d told me about those before. Humans didn’t float and didn’t have tails to wrap around things to anchor them while they slept, so they used these instead.

He helped me onto the bed, and I sighed with relief that I no longer had to concern myself with balance or motion. I simply sank onto it, and the soft surface felt good beneath my unfamiliar body, especially after the heat of the pool had eased the ache in some of my new joints and muscles.

Colin touched something on the wall, and the cool breeze in the room died away. Turning to me, he said, “Are you cold? Do you want a sheet or a blanket or something?”

I cocked my head.

“A…” He looked around, then joined me in bed and picked up the edge of one of the mats spread across it. He pulled it over me, the soft texture ticklish against my skin. “This is a sheet. It’ll keep you from getting cold.”

I just nodded because I wasn’t quite sure how to say that I liked how it felt and that the extra heat was nice. And I’d wanted to reciprocate everything Colin had done in the pool, but cocooned in this warmth with him, I was suddenly exhausted.

Caressing my cheek, Colin gazed into my eyes, a gentle smile on his lips. “I still can’t believe you’re really here.”

I couldn’t believe I was either. The only thing more surreal than this strange new body was how close I was to Colin. Lying beside him, skin touching skin—this shouldn’t have even been possible.

But it was. Even if it was only for a short time, and even if I couldn’t speak, it was possible, and it was real.

*I never thought I could be this close to you.*

*And now I can’t imagine leaving*.

He wrapped me up in his arms, and we kissed for the longest time, lazily running our hands over each other as our lips moved together. I didn’t care how tired I was—I was finally pressed up against Colin instead of meeting at the edges of our respective worlds.

Both of our bodies were unfamiliar terrain to me, but my hands and lips had spent plenty of time exploring every shape of mer, and I had learned to navigate their different curves and clefts with ease. There was no reason I couldn’t do that now.

I broke the kiss and drew back enough that I could watch my own palm drift down his side to his hip, and I watched in wonder as I traced shapes I'd never seen up close before.

Colin did the same, trailing his fingertips down my chest. "I should really thank whoever gave you those potions. They gave you an *amazing* body."

I met his eyes, some warmth rushing into my face.

"You were gorgeous as a mer." He tipped up my chin and kissed me. "And you're gorgeous as a land man." Against my lips, he added, "Lucky me." He ran a hand down my back and pulled me against him, and when he rocked his hips, our cocks rubbed together. I bit my lip, gasping at the delicious new sensations. His cock was still hard, and mine was quickly hardening again.

"Like that?" he breathed.

I nodded, frustrated by my own silence.

He kissed me, and as he did, he rolled me onto my back. He sat over me the way I had in the pool—knees on either side of my thighs—and rocked his hips rhythmically as we continued kissing. The friction made me dizzy; I'd already climaxed once, but if he kept this up, I would again.

Abruptly, though, Colin stopped. "Hang on," he whispered. "Got something that'll make this…" He didn't finish the thought, but instead leaned over the side of the bed. He opened a small compartment, felt around, and came back with a bottle of clear liquid. I watched, puzzled, as he poured some on his hand.

Then he was over me again, and he grinned as he balanced on one arm and reached between us. "Trust me on this," he murmured, and kissed me again in the same moment he wrapped his fingers around my cock.

I arched under him as his warm, slick hand stroked me. Then he adjusted his grip, and this time, his cock slid alongside mine. They were both slippery now, and as he thrust his hips, my toes curled and my entire body tingled. I wanted more but couldn't say anything, so I did the only other thing I could think of—I thrust my hips against his.

Colin gasped, breaking the kiss. "Oh God…" He shuddered and rocked harder against me. "Jesus, Lir…"

I bit my lip and gazed at him, awestruck by the sight of him—eyes squeezed shut, lips pulled tight, skin damp and flushed. Just looking at him, I swore I could feel his climax building as surely as I felt my own.

*Yes, Colin. Let me see you—*

"Fuck!" He threw his head back and gasped, and his whole body jerked and trembled as a few jets of hot liquid landed on my stomach.

After one more shudder, he stilled, murmuring something I didn't understand.

Then our eyes met, and he brushed his lips over mine. "Your turn," he whispered, and now he was stroking me, his hand slick and hot, and his breathless kisses drove me as wild as his tight, erratic strokes. My hips moved as if they were no longer mine to control, thrusting into his fist as we kissed and panted and trembled together, and in no time, I was climaxing for the second time since I'd become a land man, jerking and gasping and certain I would go out of my mind as my cum mingled with his on my belly.

Finally, I released a ragged breath and settled back on the bed. Colin's hand stopped, but he kept dropping soft kisses on my neck and shoulder while I caught my breath.

After a while, he lifted himself up and looked in my eyes. "We're not moving too fast, are we?"

I furrowed my brow.

"Uh…" He pursed his lips. "Doing too much? Getting too…" He gestured at our naked bodies.

Shaking my head, I grinned and touched his face.

He relaxed and came down for another kiss. "Just tell me if I overwhelm you. I don't want to go too fast. I just…want you."

Overwhelm me? Oh, he'd passed that point the moment his lips had first touched mine, long before I'd ever left the water for him. Lying here together, our bodies entangled beneath the warm sheet, I was far beyond overwhelmed, and I craved more.

But I couldn't tell him that. Not in words, anyway.

So instead, I touched his face and drew him in.

And once more, I hoped my kiss told him everything I couldn't.

# Chapter Fifteen

# COLIN

We dozed for a while. I woke up first, which wasn't a surprise—Lir had been in this body all of an hour, and he'd already gotten off twice. I'd have slept like the dead too.

And as long as he was still asleep beside me, his face half-buried in the pillow, I couldn't help staring at him. He looked so different now, in a human body and in human skin, but he was still definitely Lir. He had the same full lips and long lashes, the same high cheekbones and sharp jaw.

I'd never seen him with dry hair before. Sometimes, if our visits lasted for a long time, his hair would start to dry, but he'd inevitably wet it again, as if he didn't like the feeling of it drying. On land, it was smooth and soft, a few strands falling into his face as he slept.

In the late afternoon light, I couldn't see the usual hints of blue-green in his black hair, so maybe they'd gone away like the gray-blue of his skin.

He was absolutely human now instead of mer, but he was every inch Lir, and no one had ever been more beautiful. I wasn't sure how I'd expected him to look as a land person, or if I'd really even thought that far ahead. There hadn't been much time between him telling me about the potions and drinking the first.

He was here now, though, in land person form with legs that were beside mine beneath the thin sheet and lungs that drew in and released soft breaths as he slept. He was here, he was human, and he was gorgeous.

His eyelids fluttered, and when they opened, he smiled. For a second, I expected a sleepy murmur of something or another, but then I remembered he couldn't speak. Which…damn. I loved having him here, but I wished he could speak. Even with him lying here next to me, I kind of missed him

because we couldn’t have those long, meandering conversations that had made me fall for him in the first place.

On the other hand, if the choices were having him (but not speaking) and never seeing him again at all, well, it was kind of a no-brainer. If he stayed here after the third day, and we were in this for the long haul, we’d figure out how to communicate.

I stroked his disheveled black hair. “I missed you while you were away.”

Lir grimaced and tapped his chest, which I took to mean *Me too.*

As I gazed at him, I remembered what Joan had said about not fixating on what we can’t have and instead focusing on what we do have for as long as we had it. Three days would go by fast, and if we spent that time pining for all the time we couldn’t have, then we wouldn’t enjoy what we *did* have.

I also didn’t want to lose track of time and forget that we had a deadline attached to this. So I set an alarm on my phone, then gestured with it. “So, this will let us know when it’s getting close to sunset. When you have to…” I swallowed. “Anyway, when it beeps, then it’ll be time.” I put the phone aside, settled on the pillow again, and met Lir’s eyes. “Between now and then? I say we don’t think about that. If this turns out to be all we ever get together, then I want to spend every minute of it enjoying each other.” Running my thumb across his cheekbone, I softly added, “We’ll deal with the future when it gets here.”

He eyed my phone, then shrugged and nodded, so apparently he was taking me at my word.

“So I guess the question is, do I keep you here all to myself? Or do I take you out and show you everything? The town? The coast?”

Lir seemed to consider it for a moment, then smiled and pointed at the bed between us.

“Stay here?”

He nodded.

“Fine by me.” We wrapped our arms around each other and sank into another of those long, addictive kisses. I was already getting spoiled from kissing Lir without getting a crick in my neck or a cramp in my back from sprawling on the dock. No splinters. No hard-on pressing uncomfortably against the boards. Just the two of us, fit together like we were made for each other, indulging whenever we felt like it.

In the back of my mind, though, despite my vow to enjoy the good and ignore the bad, I was aware of that ticking clock. Every time I caught a glimpse of the sun, I silently begged it to stay still instead of inching toward the horizon.

*Just give us some more time. If three days is all we have, can time at least slow down?*

Deep down, I wanted Lir to stay here with me forever, but I couldn't imagine he'd want to abandon his family and the only life—hell, the only world—he'd ever known just to be with a man he barely knew. I could hope, and I could dream, but I reminded myself over and over that once the sun was close to setting on that third day, Lir would probably come to his senses.

I stroked his cheek and looked into his beautiful eyes.

*Is it wrong that I hope you'll choose to stay?*

---

Eventually, we pried ourselves out of bed. I would have been perfectly happy to lie there forever and not move, but I'd also been working all day before Lir had come to the dock, and I was getting hungry.

I got up and helped Lir to his feet. He wobbled slightly but steadied himself with a hand on the dresser.

"You good?" I asked.

He nodded.

"There's no rush," I said. "Go as slow as you need to until you have your balance."

Another nod.

I pulled on a pair of shorts, then rifled around until I found a pair that would fit Lir. He was smaller than me, but that was why God invented things like drawstrings and elastic.

Putting them on was a little awkward for him, but he managed. Once they were in place, he tugged at them and eyed me, a bemused expression on his face.

"Yeah, yeah." I rolled my eyes. "I know, it's weird to wear them around the house, but if my mom decides to come strolling in unannounced, it'll be

a lot less awkward if we're dressed."

His eyebrows rose.

"She's…" I realized I hadn't told hm about Mom's random intrusions because I'd wanted to ignore that when I was with him, and I sighed. "It's a long story. But trust me on this one—if she walks in, it would be a lot better for everyone involved if we weren't naked."

He still seemed puzzled by the whole concept, but he didn't object. When in Rome, apparently.

As we made our way to the kitchen, I realized I really needed to keep Mom away from the guesthouse for a few days. If Lir decided to stay beyond three days, then I'd have to come up with another plan, but at least for the next three, I needed to keep her at bay.

Fortunately, I did have a small arsenal of ways to score myself short periods of total privacy. Used sparingly, an excuse about some kind of sickness that involved puking would usually do the trick. She'd probably send Graciela down with a care package and text me constantly to make sure I was alive, but she'd practically call in the CDC to quarantine the place until she was absolutely certain I wouldn't pass on my microbe and ruin her social calendar. That had worked last summer when a guy had come out for a weekend so we could screw each other senseless. It would work this time too.

While I texted my mom to let her know the terrible turn my health had taken, Lir cautiously worked on getting the hang of moving around on land. He wasn't doing too badly, either. Instead of staggering like a drunk, he moved carefully and methodically. He used furniture and doorframes for balance when he could and sometimes leaned on me, but he was getting good at it.

Once I'd texted my mom, I also called Joan.

"Hey, what's up?" she answered.

"Hey, so…" It occurred to me then—just a bit too late—that I probably should've figured out what to say before I called. Oh well. Too late now. "I need to take the next three days off. Is that going to put you in a bind?"

"Not while we still have seasonal employees." I swore I could hear her shrugging. "We've got it handled. Is everything okay?"

"Oh. Yeah. Everything's…" I watched Lir taking a few cautious steps, arms out but not holding onto anything. "Just had an unexpected, um, visitor."

Lir glanced at me, brow arched, and his mischievous grin made my spine tingle.

"An unexpected visitor?" Joan asked. "A welcome one, I hope?"

"Oh, definitely."

"Huh." She was probably debating whether to grill me about it. Finally, she went with, "Well, fill me in when you get back. We'll see you in a few days."

"Perfect. See you soon." I ended the call and turned to Lir. "Okay. I'm all yours for the next three days."

His face lit up, and my heart fluttered. Good God, I really had this man in my house? In my life at all?

Yeah, I did. Holy shit, I did.

I crossed the kitchen and wrapped my arms around him, stealing a long kiss just because I could. He melted against me, which melted my heart a little more.

I really had him here in my arms, in my house, and in my life for the next three days. Oh my God.

So now the question was—what did we *do* with those three days?

In theory, I could show him around Bar Harbor and Ellsworth and maybe even take him up into Acadia, but we only had three days. How much of that did I want to spend driving around? Or being out in public where someone might see us?

On the other hand, if there was any chance of him staying, shouldn't he get a look at the world he'd be getting himself into first?

On the *other* hand, did I want to take him out into the homophobic fray? Bar Harbor and Ellsworth were mostly fine, but they weren't perfect, and there were four men wandering around who'd already tried to kill me once for being gay. Did I want to subject Lir to their vitriol? Or worse, their violence?

I held him tighter and kissed him again.

Okay, no. That settled it. We were staying here in the safety of the guesthouse. No way in hell was I tainting our too-brief time together with Lir being harassed or threatened. He was safer here. As a couple, *we* were safer here.

And I was pretty sure we wouldn't get bored.

# Chapter Sixteen

# LIR

As they often did during the hotter times of the year, a storm came in that night.

My favorite storms were those that came in during the day. The nighttime storms were beautiful in their own right, especially when there was lightning, but in the daylight, I could see everything. Crashing whitecaps. Billowing trees. Rolling clouds.

There was a wide seat behind Colin's house, facing the water, and we'd curled up on it together to watch the storm. When the wall of black clouds had come in, we sat in silence, Colin's arms around me as the air crackled with lightning and the rain soaked the ground beyond the roof's sheltering edge. We stayed dry, though occasionally the wind would snap just right and some mist or even a few large drops would land on us. I didn't mind, and he didn't seem to either.

When a drop landed on my clothes and stayed cold and damp, that was a little annoying, but I didn't complain. Needing to wear clothing at all was still strange, but Colin had shyly insisted we should at least put something on in case his mother showed up unexpectedly. He said he'd conjured up a reason for her to stay away from the house—something about him being ill and not wanting to pass it to her—but didn't want to take chances.

Clothes or not, stray raindrops or otherwise, I hoped the storm lasted all night, and that we stayed out here while it raged on. Legs lacked the flexibility of a tail, so we couldn't curl together quite the way a couple of mer could do, but this worked. Entwining our legs under a thin sheet to keep the cool evening air off our bare skin—yes, it worked. As much as I

would have preferred his skin against mine, I could live with wearing clothes, especially since it meant being this close to him at all.

Nestled against each other, we gazed out at the storm rolling across the sea. My human eyes didn't see as well as my mer eyes did, but I could still see the lightning crashing to the water and lighting up the sky.

It was so strange to be still while the whitecaps were so high and the wind was so strong. I was accustomed to feeling the strength of the storm in every powerful gale and crashing wave. It was exhilarating and wild, riding all that chaos.

But Colin and I were still. While the air crackled with every bolt of lightning, while thunder rumbled deep in my bones and water slapped rock with force that could shape land and sink ships, we were just…still.

And the more I thought about it, the more that described every moment I spent with Colin. Those afternoons we'd spent at the end of his dock had been some of the most peaceful, perfect times I'd ever known. One look at him, and everything had been perfect. Everything had made sense, as if this was and always had been exactly where I needed to be.

I turned to him, and though I couldn't see him well in the darkness, there was just enough light from the occasional flash of lightning to illuminate his features. As always, there was peace in Colin's eyes. Quiet stillness, much like the two of us here in the heart of a violent storm, even while the world seemed to shake apart all around us.

I touched his cheek, still marveling at the warmth of his skin beneath my fingertips and his body pressed against and around mine.

Perhaps it was just as well I couldn't speak while I was on land. I didn't imagine I could ever find enough words—or the right words—to tell him how it felt to look at him. How I could be in a different world and a different body than I'd known my whole life and then gaze into his eyes and feel like I was home. It was probably reckless and impulsive to think like that, and to be here at all, but I just didn't care. The feelings he sent coursing through me with a touch or a glance made the storm seem, by comparison, like little more than a lazy breeze and a summer drizzle.

I couldn't resist, and I leaned in for a kiss. Colin met me halfway, and I felt thunder in my chest, but I had no idea if it had a thing to do with the storm. His lips were soft as they always were, and my toes curled as he pulled me closer, sliding his hand into my hair as he slipped his tongue into

my mouth. I touched his face and indulged in trailing my fingers over his sharp features and warm skin and the gritty hints of a beard on his jaw.

We stayed like that for a long time, ignoring the storm and kissing lazily in the darkness. Then Colin murmured, “Let’s go in the house before it starts getting cold.” He slid his hand under my shirt. “And so we don’t have to bother with these anymore.”

I shivered and nodded. There would be other storms. I wasn’t about to waste another moment with a barrier between Colin and me.

I barely remembered getting up from the seat and moving into the house. One moment we were outside, and the next we were in the room where we’d neem earlier, sinking together onto the bed with Colin on top of me. The wind screamed outside and rain battered the walls and windows around us, but here in this room, everything was soft and gentle. While lightning cracked open the sky and waves battered the shore, Colin’s lips trailed kisses down the side of my throat and his hands explored me all over.

“There are so many things I want to do with you,” he whispered in my ear, trembling fingertips drifting down my side.

I bit my lip and arched under him. I wished I could tell him how much I loved what he did to me, but maybe words wouldn’t do it justice anyway.

He kissed above my shoulder. “I just…don’t want to do too much. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I wasn’t sure what he meant. How could he possibly hurt me?

“Do you trust me?”

I nodded. I’d left my world and body for him—of course I trusted him.

“Stay right there.” He leaned away from the bed, and when he returned, he held up the bottle of thick, clear liquid he’d used the first time we’d been in his bed. The memory of his slick strokes made my spine tingle. “I want to try something new. I think you’ll like it.” He uncapped the bottle. “If you don’t, we can stop. Promise. Any time.”

I nodded. Don’t like it? That had been the farthest thing from my mind whenever we’d been in his bed.

Colin poured some of the liquid in his hand and put the bottle aside. Then he stroked some of it onto my cock, which took my breath away. Having his hand or his mouth on me was one thing. This extra slickness? I could barely stand it. After a few strokes, he stopped and met my gaze. “Hold yourself just like this. Upright.”

I did, wrapping my fingers around the base.

Colin got up and climbed on top of me, and I held my breath as he came down. My cock pressed against him, which felt odd, but then… Then something seemed to yield, and he took my cock inside him. First just a little, then—stroke by stroke—more, until I moved my hand out of the way and he came all the way down.

I exhaled, staring in wonder at the sight of him riding me, my head spinning from the barrage of delicious sensations that surged through me every time he moved. I'd wondered how two land people coupled. Now I knew. Now my cock was sliding into Colin, and I could barely breathe as he groaned and took me all the way inside.

Lightning lit up the room for a couple of heartbeats, illuminating every inch of the beautiful man above me and burning into my mind the image of him wearing his pleasure on his face as he rose and fell above me.

Every time he rose off me, I wanted to follow. I wanted to bury myself in him again. Before long, that urge became irresistible, and I experimentally pressed my heels into the bed and clumsily pushed up with my hips.

Colin gasped. "Oh God…" He planted his hands on the bed beside my shoulders. "Do that again."

I did, and he rocked his hips to complement the motion. I thought my movements were clumsy and uncoordinated, but if they were, Colin didn't mind. His moans grew louder, and the bed shrieked under us, and every thrust and every gulp for breath drowned out the storm going on outside. And me? I was ready to lose my mind completely. He was so tight and hot, every thrust of his hips or mine sending powerful sensations crashing through me until I didn't think I could take any more, and he took me higher and higher as he moaned, "Oh my God, Lir…"

If I'd suddenly regained my ability to speak just then, I wouldn't have even known it because I couldn't breathe.

Then Colin balanced on one arm, and with his other, he began stroking himself. He sucked in a breath through his teeth and shuddered hard, clenching around me and taking me even higher.

As I watched him, I recalled how it had felt when he'd stroked the slick stuff onto me, so I picked up the bottle and put some on my hand. When I nudged his hand out of the way and started stroking him, he shuddered, and

he murmured, “Oh fuck, yes,” under his breath as he grew even tighter. He rode me faster, and when I tightened my grasp, he moaned.

“Oh God,” he breathed. “I’m gonna come.”

I gritted my teeth and thrust up into him harder as I stroked his cock harder, and then he gasped and jerked, cum erupting onto my hand and belly. The sight and sound and sensation of Colin coming was more than I could handle, and I came too, driving myself as deep as I could while my climax crashed over me.

All at once, we both stilled. Colin slumped over me, trembling and panting. “Jesus Christ.”

I closed my eyes and ran my fingers through his sweaty hair. The thunder continued to rumble outside, and the rain continued to batter the roof, but in here, the world was still and silent except for our rapid breathing and my pounding heart.

After a moment, Colin lifted himself off me, and I gasped as my cock—now extra sensitive after I’d come—slid free.

We lay there a while, just catching our breath and trembling, before Colin got up to get us some towels. We cleaned off, and then he pulled the sheet up on top of us, and we were back to my favorite place: curled up together in the middle of his bed.

“So, um…” Colin grinned shyly. “You enjoyed that?”

I nodded vigorously.

He laughed, sliding his hand up my arm. “Good. We’ll have to do it again.”

Oh, yes, we would have to do it again. As much as both of us could stand. In fact…

Communicating without speaking was difficult enough when it was something I could describe. This, what we’d just done—I didn’t have words for it that I could convey with my hands and my face. The best I could do was gesture at him, then myself, then flip my hand.

Colin tilted his head. “You want to switch? Be on top?” He paused, the blush in his cheeks deepening. “Taking my cock instead of the other way around?”

I was pretty sure that described what I was thinking, so I nodded.

His face lit up with a grin. “Maybe we will. It’s not easy the first few times, though.” He smoothed my hair. “We’ll have to go really, really slow so I don’t hurt you. Because it can hurt. I won’t lie.”

I swallowed.

He caressed my cheek. “We can still try if you want to. If you don’t like it, we can always stop. Do… Do you *want* to try?”

I nodded vigorously.

A cautious smile appeared on his lips. Then he dropped his gaze and laughed with sudden nerves. “Usually I’d want to take things slow and not do everything all at once, but…” Meeting my eyes again, he whispered, “Except…we don’t have much time.” He paused, and finally sighed, shoulders sinking a little. “And I don’t want to end up hurting you. I’d be careful as hell, but when we have so little time…”

I shrugged. If something was potentially painful, then it wasn’t necessary. I was more than satisfied with the things we’d done already, none of which had hurt, and as long as I could keep making Colin shudder and climax like that, I didn’t care what we did.

“Let’s skip it,” he whispered. “So I don’t hurt you and ruin this little bit of time we have.” A grin came to life. “But we can keep doing it the way we just did, if you like it that way.”

I was already nodding, and Colin kissed me softly.

Even as we kissed and cuddled, I couldn’t help being disappointed that there were things we couldn’t try. Not because Colin had suggested it and then retracted it, but that we simply didn’t have enough time to take chances with anything that might be painful.

Because there wasn’t much time. Just a few precious days before we were once again two very different bodies existing in two very different worlds.

My heart sank.

A few precious days before I either stayed on land forever or I returned to the sea. And if I returned to the sea, I wouldn’t be able to come back here.

Closing my eyes, I cuddled closer as the storm continued without us outside the house. Colin wrapped his arms tighter around me and pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

*Three days isn’t nearly long enough to love you, but I’ll be thankful forever that we had any time at all.*

# Chapter Seventeen

# COLIN

I kind of felt guilty about holing up in the guesthouse rather than showing Lir around, but I was still convinced it was the safest bet. He didn't need to know what it was like to get gay-bashed.

Even if safety weren't an issue, going out and exploring seemed to be a bit of a moot point. Lir wasn't interested in exploring Bar Harbor, or really anything beyond the yard around the guesthouse, and that was just as well because I would be a failure as a tour guide. I'd just spend all my time staring at him and wondering how I'd ever been lucky enough to have him in my life.

But if all he wanted to see was my bedroom? Specifically, my bed? Mission accomplished.

Being in my bed didn't even mean having sex. I mean, I wouldn't have been opposed to a three-day marathon of sex with this man, but bodies have their limitations. So we fooled around sometimes—lazily fucking, indulging in long, decadent blowjobs, making out until our lips went numb—and the rest of the time, we just hung out.

That was what we were doing now. For the last hour or so, we'd been lounging naked on top of the sheets. Lir was still fascinated with the videos I could pull up on my phone, and I could have literally spent days watching him laugh at ridiculous cat videos. The only downside was that I couldn't hear him laugh, but that seemed like a small price to pay to be tangled up with him in my bed, so I didn't complain.

My battery was beginning to crap out, though, so I leaned over and plugged it into the charger on the nightstand. Then I returned to my favorite place in the world—the middle of my bed with a naked, smiling Lir.

I slid a hand over his stomach, and his palm drifted up my forearm. “So did you specifically ask for a gorgeous human body?” I trailed my fingers up his abs, grinning when they tightened beneath my touch. “Or did you just get exceptionally lucky?”

Lir bit his lip, squirming under my hand. Then he lifted his chin, but instead of kissing my mouth, he went for my neck, and I gasped at the softness of his lips and the scrape of his stubble.

“God, Lir,” I whispered, stroking his back. “I wish we could do this forever.”

He lifted his head, and when our eyes met, he tugged at the cord on his neck, indicating the second vial. Raising his eyebrows, he shrugged.

Even if he’d been able to speak, he wouldn’t have needed to say a word. The implication was plain as day: *I* can *stay here forever*.

I covered his hand with mine and squeezed it gently. “But neither of our worlds would ever understand.”

Another shrug. Then he stroked my face, lifted his chin, and pressed a tender kiss to my lips.

Barely pulling away enough to speak, I whispered, “Would you *want* to stay here?”

Lir drew back fully. Brow furrowing and eyes losing focus, he seemed to consider the question. After a long moment, he looked at me again, and he nodded.

My heart went wild. “Really?”

Another nod. He opened his mouth as if to speak, but then closed it, frowning like he’d just remembered he couldn’t talk and had no idea how to convey what he wanted to say. Finally, he cupped my face in both hands and kissed me, and my heart thumped even faster. Maybe he could say anything out loud, but his kiss was… Jesus.

*I hear you, baby. Loud and clear.*

And damn, now I didn’t want to let him go. Wrapping my arms around him, I deepened the kiss and gently rolled him onto his back. He held me tighter, sighing as we settled in this new position, and his kiss intensified even more. So did mine. God, I didn’t just want him now—I *needed* him. I needed him like he was going to be here forever, and I needed him like this would be the last time I ever touched him, and that was a kind of hunger I’d never felt before. I *loved* it.

Lir groaned into my kiss and rutted against my hip, his cock as hard as mine. Then he broke the kiss and gestured at the nightstand.

I glanced at it. “Lube?” Wait, did he know that word? “The bottle?”

He nodded.

I shivered—lube meant he either wanted to jerk me off or fuck me, and yes, yes, fucking *yes*.

I grabbed the bottle and handed it to him. He poured some in his hand, and our eyes met as he started stroking himself. He bit his lip. I fought back a moan.

“Hand and knees?” I rasped.

Grinning, Lir nodded. We’d tried that position earlier, and he’d loved it, so I wasn’t at all surprised.

He was also a fast learner. I’d guided him through prepping me, even though I didn’t always need it, and made sure he knew to push in slowly. He’d taken it all to heart, and now he knelt behind me and gently teased me open with his slick fingers. Not that it took much, especially since we’d already done this once today, but I still loved it, and apparently so did he.

He teased me until I was shaking with need. I moaned his name, or at least hoped I did, and rocked back against him, driving his fingers deeper even as I tried to articulate how much I wanted his cock.

“God… Come on…” I let my head fall forward and I clawed at the sheets as I moaned, “Not your fingers.”

Lir started to withdraw them, but then slid them back in, and the soft breath of silent laughter said he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“Lir…” I panted. “*Please*.”

As his fingers slowly slid out this time, I silently begged him to make good on it, to pull them all the way out and replace them with that thick cock. I’d always enjoyed bottoming, but I was downright addicted to it with him, and I needed him to quit fucking around and just *fuck me*, damn it.

He wasn’t teasing this time. His fingers withdrew all the way, and then finally, he pressed the head of his cock against me. He was dutifully easing himself in the way I’d shown him how to do, but I was way too ready to take it slow. I leaned back, and he gasped as his cock thrust into me.

“Oh, fuck, yes,” I groaned, and started rocking my hips. He let me take the lead at first but then began thrusting as well, and… *Damn*, he was getting good at this. He still struggled a little with balance when he walked, but Lir had definitely figured out some uses for his land-person body.

Maybe this was easier because he didn’t have to worry about falling. Maybe his body just intuitively knew what to do when arousal took over. Whatever the case, once he found a rhythm, his hips rocked deliciously, his breath gusting across my neck as his cock moved inside me.

Usually, when I’d been with someone who was silent during sex, it meant they weren’t into it. Not so with Lir. He couldn’t use his voice to tell me what he liked or moan to tell me I was doing something right, but that just meant I had to be tuned in to his body language—the twitch of his fingers on my skin, the way his hips would start rocking when I was stroking him, the rising tension as he neared the edge.

Maybe he couldn’t speak, but that didn’t mean he was silent. A sharp gasp. A ragged exhalation. Sucking in a deep breath, holding it, then releasing it in a nearly soundless—but not—sigh as a shudder ran through his entire body.

And I realized that I wasn’t making much noise either. I didn’t even know if I’d gone silent so I could hear him better, or if… Hell, I didn’t know what, but I liked it. I loved the way our breathing fell into sync, the whisper of skin brushing skin as we moved together, and the barely audible sounds of the mattress accommodating our combined weight.

In the back of my mind, I’d worried that Lir’s inability to speak would mean he couldn’t fully consent to sex, but his lack of a voice didn’t mean he couldn’t communicate. From the first moment we’d touched after he’d changed into a land person, everything he did screamed *yes*. His hands and mouth moved on my skin with curiosity. His hips rocked against mine with hunger and need. When he shut his eyes and bit his lip or gripped my hips tighter as he drove himself deeper, he didn’t have to say a single word, and there was no doubt in my mind that he wanted this. That he wanted me.

Shuddering hard, Lir buried his face against my neck, and his hips jerked as he thrust deeper, and then he released a ragged breath in the same moment he pushed himself as deep as I could take him, and his near-silent orgasm sent me right over the brink with him. I managed a quiet grunt, but otherwise I was silent too as his erratic thrusts kept me coming until I saw stars.

As his body relaxed over mine, he released a long, soft sigh alongside my neck, and I was pretty sure that was one of the sexiest things I’d ever heard. My time with Lir had been nothing if not educational; I had definitely learned that the inability to cry out, to moan, to curse, to even

whisper *Jesus Christ* did nothing to take away from the heat and passion between two people.

Lir shuddered again, and we both shivered as he withdrew. Once we'd cleaned ourselves off, we returned to bed, and I pulled up a sheet to keep us from getting cold as we cuddled together in the middle.

As he rested his head on my shoulder, I sighed happily. There were moments I still couldn't believe this man existed at all, and it barely seemed real that he was here with me now, curled up on dry land beneath the covers of my bed.

I'd had boyfriends before but never anything like what I had with Lir, and damn if this didn't make me realize how much I'd been missing. Lack of sex could be frustrating. Lack of a boyfriend could get lonely. It was only now, though, with Lir's body tangled with mine under the sheets, that I realized just how much I'd been starving for simple affection. Not only the delicious afterglow of sex, but lazy kisses, gentle touches, and just lying together because we wanted to.

I stroked his hair and looked in his eyes. "I've never felt like this for anyone. I… God, I don't even know how to put it into words." I brushed my lips across his, then just wrapped him up in my arms and held him, closing my eyes as our body heat mingled beneath the thin blanket. "I just know I love you."

Lir returned my embrace just as fiercely. I buried my face in his neck, and for the longest time, we just stayed like that. And it was perfect. Every moment with him was perfect.

Maybe it was magic. Maybe it was fate. All I knew was I would never stop loving the way our bodies fit together like they were made for each other.

But why did it have to be for only three days?

# Chapter Eighteen

# LIR

I didn't imagine the sea witch's potion had intended to make me fit this perfectly against Colin's body, but I wasn't going to complain about the result. Everything we did—even when we were sleeping or standing in his kitchen or, as we were now, kissing in the hot pool—we just *fit*.

I loved everything about this. Sitting in the hot water. Sliding my hands all over his body. Colin sliding his all over me. Long, deep kisses. We'd only meant to come out here for a little while, but then we'd started kissing, and… I didn't even know how much time had passed. We could do this until nightfall for all I cared, or if he wanted to go back to his bed, we could —

"Colin?" A woman's voice startled us apart. "Are you feeling any better, honey?"

"Oh, *shit,*" Colin hissed and turned toward the house.

A heartbeat later, a tall, golden-haired women stepped out.

Colin tensed.

As soon as the woman saw us, she stopped abruptly and stared, mouth opening and closing like a dumbstruck fish's.

Then her expression darkened. Her jaw snapped shut and her lips pulled so tight they nearly vanished, and her eyes narrowed as she glared at Colin. "What is going on?"

"Mom." Colin put up his hands. "Can we please—"

"Don't you try to placate me! What is going on here?"

My stomach knotted. So this was his mother?

Colin kept his voice calm, but I could hear the notes of worry and frustration in every word. “Can we do this inside? I’d rather—”

“Just who the hell are you?” She pointed a sharp finger at me, the gesture and the scowl reminding me of how all the mer imagined the sea witch, if considerably scarier. “Why are you in *my* house?”

“Mom,” Colin growled.

“No, he’s going to answer me because I want to know—”

“The answer is none of your business.”

“For God’s sake, Colin. It’s embarrassing enough that you won’t date women. Now you have to choose someone like *him*?” She swung her hand in my direction, and though she couldn’t reach me, I instinctively ducked, and I flailed because I was still somewhat clumsy in this body.

Colin caught me with an arm around my waist. “Easy.” Then he twisted slightly so he was between us. “Enough, Mom. We’re—”

“Do you want me to go up and tell your father about this?” She pointed emphatically at me while glaring at her son. “Is that man even *legal*?”

“Mom, for God’s sake, he’s here on a student visa. We met in class.”

“And why is he *here*?” She made a sharp gesture at the ground beneath her feet. “And why are you two—are…” She recoiled in horror. “Are you both *naked*?”

I’d always been puzzled by the land people’s need to hide their bodies, but in that moment, I wanted to hide mine. I sank a little farther into the water and crossed my arms and legs. I didn’t know how much it would help, or even what I hoped it would do, but the discomfort of her scrutiny made it impossible not to try.

“We’ve been over this, Colin,” she continued. “We’ve discussed this a thousand times. If you must live this…*lifestyle*, then live it someplace else, because your father and I don’t want to see it. And we certainly don’t want people thinking we condone it. And now you’re bringing—”

“I’m not discussing this out here. Let’s go inside.” Colin started to get up but paused and gave his mother a look I didn’t quite understand.

She huffed and turned around.

To me, he whispered, “Sorry. Back in a minute.” Then he got out of the pool, pulled on a pair of shorts, and muttered, “All right. Let’s go inside.”

His mother fixed a venomous glare on me, but finally followed Colin inside. “Colin, I told you not to bring any men into my house and—”

The closing door cut her off.

Then they started arguing. Though I couldn't hear well enough to understand them, I could hear their raised voices and I could see them through the window. They both gestured wildly, their expressions contorted with anger and frustration. She jabbed a finger at him and narrowed her eyes. He put up his hands again but then turned away and raked his fingers through his hair.

I stared in disbelief. I'd struggled to imagine everything Colin had told me about his family refusing to accept two men loving each other. But now…

Something banged, seeming to rattle the entire house. Then everything was silent.

Cautiously, I craned my neck.

Colin's mother was nowhere in sight, and Colin was on his way out to the deck where I waited.

He didn't look at me as he stripped off his shorts and joined me in the water again. My movements still a little awkward, I slid closer to sit beside him, and I put a hand on his knee.

Colin sighed heavily as he wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pressed a kiss to my temple. "I'm sorry about that. Everything she said, and…"

I looked in his eyes, hating that I couldn't say anything or even ask if he was all right. Was he? Did he know that he didn't need to apologize for me? Curse it, did that damn potion have to steal my ability to speak?

"Remember everything I told you?" He absently smoothed my hair. "How land people sometimes hate gay people? People like us?"

I nodded, my stomach curdling at the memory of both of those conversations and the one he'd had with his mother.

"That includes my parents. And they hate… Well, they don't hate me, I don't think, but they hate what I am." Colin looked in my eyes. "They hate that we could love each other."

My heart ached. I squeezed his arm, and even if I'd had a voice right then, I had no idea what I could have said.

Colin dropped his gaze again. "It's not just gay people they hate. It's…" He swallowed hard, and he seemed to think about it for a moment, then sat back against the side of the pool, shoulders drooping as he released a heavy sigh. "We don't have much time. I don't want to waste it telling you all the

reasons land people have figured out how to hate each other. The bottom line is that it's stupid and doesn't make any sense."

I settled back against him, resting my hand on his chest as he wrapped me in his arms again. He didn't say anything for a while, but the longer we sat here, the more the tension in his body seemed to ease. His fingers combed through my hair, and his breathing sounded steadier and more relaxed.

Finally, he looked in my eyes. "I'm sorry about all that, by the way. I thought I could keep her from showing up, but she—"

I touched his lips and shook my head. Then I kissed him gently. He was tense again but only for a moment before he sighed, his lips softening against mine. He cradled my neck in one hand and gave one of those low moans that I felt more than heard as he pulled me in closer. Not like he was turned on but like he was relaxing into my touch. Good. That was all I wanted now. We could couple later if he wanted to, but right now, I just wanted him to breathe easier and let some of the tension ease from his muscles.

This wouldn't fix anything in his world. It certainly wouldn't chase away his mother and her poison. But at least for now, I could make him think about something more pleasant.

It wasn't far from my mind, though. He'd mentioned his family sometimes while we'd talked, and they'd always seemed to make the clouds gather in his eyes, and now I knew why. Having witnessed the way she spoke to him, the way her words seemed to cut him—it was heartbreaking. All those times I'd thought my own parents were unreasonable and overbearing, clearly I hadn't known how much worse it could be.

Sighing, I stroked Colin's hair. I wished I could do more than offer up a distraction. I wished we could do this and be together for more than a handful of days.

More than that, though, I wished I could take him away from this place and these people.

*You deserve so much better, Colin*.

# Chapter Nineteen

# COLIN

Lying beside Lir while the rain tapped gently on the window, I should have been cocooned in a sense of peace as warm as his arms and the blanket.

But I wasn't. While Lir slept soundly on my shoulder, an arm draped over my stomach and his knee fitted between mine, I was wide awake. Staring into the darkness, I absently stroked his hair and tried to convince time to slow down. The sun would be up in a few hours. Several more after that, it would go down again. And before it did, Lir and I had a decision to make.

I held him a little closer and kissed the top of his head. Tomorrow would seal the deal one way or the other. Either Lir stayed with me as a land person, or he went back into the ocean and I never saw him again. I wanted to believe we could go back to our visits at the end of the dock, but the fact was, given how furious his family would be when he returned, they'd never let him near the surface again. If he took the potion and went back into the ocean tomorrow, it *would* be the last time I saw him.

But if he didn't drink it…

If he stayed on land…

I thought about my parents and how they'd responded to me being gay. About my mother's reaction to walking in on me and Lir. About how they'd made it clear they'd never accept me bringing home a boyfriend, and no boyfriend or partner or husband of mine would be a part of the Everroad family the way a girlfriend or wife would be.

As far as my family was concerned, what Lir and I had would never be real or valid. Period.

I thought about the assholes who'd sabotaged the boat and left me to die out there in the storm, all because they were pissed to find out a gay guy had been in the locker room and on the swim team with them in high school. About all the reasons I'd been afraid to show affection in public with men I'd dated in the past. About the friend who'd been beaten up just for existing as a gay man.

The world had come a long way in the last few decades, but it still had a long way to go. People still hated us for loving people of the same sex, and that hatred came out in everything from dirty looks to violence. Even in a place like Downeast Maine where plenty of queer people thrived, there was plenty of hatred too, and that wasn't going away any time soon.

As I stroked Lir's hair, my throat tightened and my heart sank. The truth was, we really only had two options.

One, Lir stayed with me in a world full of people who hated what we were and who we loved.

Or two, he went back to the mer and lived happily among people who loved him regardless.

As much as it broke my heart to imagine living without him, what kind of asshole would I be to ask him to choose my world over his?

And for that matter, I couldn't make him live in silence in exchange for being together. Wasn't that what my family wanted from me? To stay quiet? Seen but not heard? Here but not queer?

I missed the sound of Lir's voice and the way he made my heart skip when he laughed. He could still light up a room with his smile, but I missed our conversations. If something happened to him and cost him his voice, that would never in a million years change how I felt about him, but what right did I have to silence that sweet, playful sound just so I could have him?

Staying with me meant Lir would be silent forever, and we'd have to be silent more often than not about *being* together. It meant loving each other at arm's length in the daylight and only touching in the shadows. It meant living in a kind of fear that mer couldn't even comprehend, because sex and love weren't wrong down there.

Tears stung my eyes as I held him closer and breathed in his now familiar scent. I wanted Lir more than I'd ever imagined wanting someone else. I loved him so much it hurt. And as much as it killed me to think about it, the fact was, keeping him here would be selfish. No matter how I tried to

rationalize things or reframe them, I kept coming back to the same conclusion. It hurt like hell, but there was no way I could be fair to Lir or honest with him unless I accepted that conclusion.

The truth was, I loved him so deeply that I *had* to let him go.

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I was exhausted the next morning. I'd barely slept. More than once, I'd vowed to tell him my conclusion as soon as we woke up, but around the time the sun was rising, I realized we only had a few hours left. Why waste that time mourning a future that wasn't here yet?

No, I wouldn't do that to him or to myself. We had today, and we would enjoy it right up until the end.

My mind was made up by the time Lir's eyes fluttered open. "Hey. Morning."

He met my gaze, and that sleepy smile did things to me I didn't think I'd ever felt before. I was so ridiculously in love with this man, and I was determined to make sure the last few hours we had together were as perfect as I could make them, and my goddamned heart was breaking because these would *be* our last few hours.

*It's not fair, but it's the hand we've been dealt.*

I kissed his cheek.

*So we might as well play it as best we can.*

As far as I was concerned, that was exactly what we did—by decadently enjoying each other like we had all the time in the world. Lazy sex. Watching ridiculous cat videos on my phone. Making out in the hot tub before moving back into the bedroom to get each other off again. More cuddling and watching silly videos.

All too soon, though, right in the middle of a montage of kittens and puppies playing, the alarm on my phone went off. I was pretty sure Lir couldn't read the words *sundown soon* on the screen, but from the way his shoulders fell when he glanced out the window, he had to know what it meant.

No more putting it off. Time to face reality.

I ran my fingers through his hair. "So, I guess this is it."

He nodded, and he searched my eyes. Tapping the vial on his neck, he raised his eyebrows in an unspoken, *What do you think?*

As much as it killed me, my answer hadn't changed. I took his hand in both of mine, and fought hard to hold his gaze and keep my voice steady. "Listen. I love you, Lir. I've loved you since we were out there." I nodded toward the dock where we'd spent so many hours. "And being with you like this…"

He touched my face with his free hand, and though he smiled, his eyes were full of apprehension. He could hear the "but" coming a mile away.

"I want you to stay here. More than anything in the world." I winced. "More than anything except one thing."

Lir cocked his head.

"I want you to be happy. I want you to be loved and accepted and safe." I brought his hand up and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. "That's why I want you to go back to the mer."

His eyes widened and his lips parted. He squeezed my hand and shook his head, mouthing, *No.*

"You have to go," I said shakily. "I want you here. I never, ever want you to leave. But you won't be happy here." I kissed his knuckles again. "You won't be *safe* here. And I would rather let you go than keep you someplace where you have to be silent, and—" My voice tried to break. There was no way I'd get all these words out without falling apart, and I didn't want that to be how he remembered me. "Your family loves you. Your people accept you." My vision was blurring, but I blinked the tears away. "Go back to them. I can't ask you to stay here and be hated just for loving me."

Lir touched my face and pressed a kiss to my lips. Then he drew back, and a tear slid down his cheek as he mouthed, *I love you.*

For the first time since he'd come to dry land, I was thankful he couldn't speak. I was pretty sure hearing the words out loud, especially if he was as close to breaking down as I was, would have broken me.

I indulged in a long kiss just to make sure I had him committed to memory. "We should… We should go outside. To the dock."

Lir released a ragged breath. Drawing back, he nodded.

In silence, we got out of my bed and each pulled on a pair of shorts. Neither of us spoke on the way out of the house, though he paused for a

lingering look at the shells I'd collected from our summer together. He let his fingers drift over the edge of the oyster shell from the first day.

I swallowed. "You can take one with you if you want to."

He glanced at me, then at the shells. Finally, he plucked one from the second row—a scallop that was larger than my palm—and pressed it to his chest as he smiled at me.

I smiled back despite the pain in my own chest, and I kissed him softly.

The sun was inching lower in the sky, so we couldn't wait, and we walked to the end of the dock. Lir looked around as if to make sure we were alone. Evidently satisfied we were, he took off the shorts I'd given him. He set them aside and put the shell on top of them, and with nothing on but the vial around his neck, he sat on the edge of the dock.

As I sat beside him, he put his feet in the water and hissed from the cold. Then he set his jaw, took a breath, and slipped all the way in. He grimaced, and his teeth chattered as he started shivering.

"Drink the potion." I squeezed his shoulder. "Your land body won't handle the cold for long."

He looked up at me, then reached for my face with a wet, shaky hand. I leaned down, and we shared a quick kiss, but he was shivering too hard for anything more than that.

"Drink it," I whispered. "Before you get too cold."

Lir held my gaze, but with a resigned sigh, he nodded. His hands were shaking too much to uncap the vial, and mine weren't much better, but I got it open.

He looked at the vial. Then at me. Then at the vial again. His jaw worked, probably to keep his teeth from chattering, and mine worked because I was trying like hell not to let my emotions surface.

Our eyes met one last time.

Then Lir threw back the potion.

He let the vial fall against his chest, and he pushed himself up to claim one more kiss. We had a couple of seconds at most—far too brief for something that intense—before he gasped and tensed. I kept a tight grip on his hand, worried he might sink into the water before his gills had opened again, and I didn't let go even as the bright magic light made me look away. His fingers twitched in mine, and his skin changed, going from warm and soft to cool and damp.

And finally, his hand stilled.

I cautiously turned back, and the light had dimmed. When Lir looked up at me this time, it was with the wide, blue-green eyes of a merman. His skin was that beautiful raincloud blue-grey again, with iridescent blue fins rippling along his arms and the same blue lining the gills that scored his sides. Just below the surface, his skin faded into the scales that formed his tail.

He was mer. Every inch the man I'd fallen for even when I'd believed there was no way we could be closer together. Every inch the man I'd be hurting for until the day I died.

The lump in my throat refused to move. "I'm going to miss you."

"Me too." God, it was so good to hear his voice again—and painful at the same time, because he was leaving. He pushed himself up and pressed a long kiss to my lips. Barely breaking away, he whispered, "I love you, Colin."

I was right. Hearing him say it out loud ripped my heart in half. "I love you too."

We drew apart, and our eyes met. There was so much I wanted to say, but I didn't trust myself to say a single word without breaking down. And really, nothing I could say would make this moment hurt any less.

Lir held my gaze for a moment. He caressed my cheek with cool, wet fingers, and he opened his mouth like he might speak, but finally he just kissed me. Long and gentle, as if he wanted one last taste before he left.

He took the scallop shell, held my gaze for a heartbeat or two, and then, without a word, twisted around and dove beneath the surface. In a matter of seconds, he'd vanished into the sea, leaving behind nothing but ripples that quickly faded away.

And though the sun hadn't gone down yet, I didn't think my world had ever been so dark.

# Chapter Twenty

# LIR

The swim home felt like it took a hundred times longer than it should have. The entire time, I wanted to be furious. I wanted to hate Colin for sending me away.

But damn it, I couldn't.

I'd seen the hurt in his eyes while he'd told me to go back. I'd heard it in his voice, felt it in his trembling touch—Colin didn't want to let me go any more than I wanted to leave. It would have hurt a lot less if he'd rejected me and sent me away because he didn't want me. Then I could hate him, and I could swim with all my might away from his world and back to mine without this ache in my chest.

*Hating you would be so much easier than loving you like this*.

There was nothing to be done, though. He'd made his decision. I'd drunk the potion. All that remained was for me to return home and face my family.

I'd barely crossed into the city when a couple of sentries appeared out of nowhere.

"We're taking you back to the palace," one growled as she grabbed my arm. "The king and queen have been looking for you."

Silently, I nodded. I had my voice back, but what was there to say?

She pointed toward the palace. "*Swim*."

I did. They easily kept up with me—on a normal day, I could have outpaced them just like I could any mer, but not now. I hardly had the energy to cut a lazy path toward the palace. If one of the sentries got impatient and dragged me? Fine. Let them.

They didn’t, though. I swam with them on either side of my tail and barely mustered any trepidation as we went between the columns at the front of the palace. We definitely didn’t go unnoticed. Heads turned, and there were voices in the corridor. Agitated voices. Angry ones.

My brother’s voice.

When Caspian rounded the bend and glared at me, eyes full of fury, I just stared back at him, resigned and surrendered.

To the sentries, he snarled, “I’ll take him from here.”

The sentries didn’t wait for further dismissal, and they vanished behind me into the corridor.

Before my brother could begin telling me what a fool I was, I looked in his eyes. “You win, Caspian.” My own voice sounded alien to my ears, and I had no idea if it was because I hadn’t spoken in three days or because my heartbreak had made it into my words. “I came back.”

Caspian stared at me, mouth still open for the tirade he’d no doubt planned to unleash. Slowly, though, the hostility eased, and his voice was quieter, almost apologetic as he said, “Mother and Father will want to see you. They’re not pleased about you disobeying them, and especially not pleased that you disappeared for so long.”

I nodded. I expected as much.

Caspian jerked his head up the corridor. He started swimming, and I followed. More than once, he had to slow down and circle back around to let me catch up.

After we’d gone a ways, I slowed to a stop. “Caspian.”

He turned, impatience carved into his features.

“Just give me a few moments alone in my chamber,” I pleaded. “I’m… I won’t go anywhere.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’ve disappeared after—”

“I won’t.” My shoulders sagged and even my fins felt limp and lifeless. “There’s nothing for me at the surface anymore. Tell Mother and Father I’ve come back. I’m not going anywhere this time.”

He studied me, and his expression softened. “Are you all right, Lir?”

No. No, I was the farthest from all right I’d ever been. But how could I explain that to my brother?

“I’m fine. I just need some time.” I was about to swim away but paused. “If you want to wait outside my chamber, or post a sentry there, then…” I shrugged.

His eyes widened. “Lir, what’s—”

“Just leave me be, all right?” I pleaded “I need to be alone for a little while. Before I see Mother and Father.”

He stared me. “Alone? Or—”

“Caspian.” I put up a hand. “Don’t. I’m not going anywhere. Not anymore.”

“I just want to—”

“*Enough*.” It took all the energy I had to speak with any force at all, and it still came out sounding pathetic and unsteady. “I’m not going back to the land man. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Lir, I—”

“Just leave me *alone*. Come… Come get me when Mother and Father want to see me, and I’ll go to them. But I just need a little time first.”

Bewilderment filled his expression, but he said nothing. Mute, he nodded.

As I swam deeper into the palace, though, he called after me, “I told you there was nothing but heartbreak up there.”

I gritted my teeth and kept swimming. He’d been right, but I couldn’t face him now, or explain that the heartbreak wasn’t what he’d thought it was. How could he begin to understand? Not that it mattered—I didn’t have the strength to explain it. Not to him. Not to anyone. I’d returned to the sea with a broken heart, and I wasn’t going back. What more needed to be said?

If I hadn’t long ago memorized the complex network of corridors, I’d have been lost, but I swam through it as if the current were simply carrying me to my familiar chamber.

My parents would not be happy. Seeing them again would not be pleasant, and there would certainly be a punishment. Neptune knew when I’d see the outside of this palace again.

I didn’t care. Today, I was too numb to feel anything that wasn’t this broken heart. My parents could berate me for going to the sea witch and going to shore, for being foolish enough to get close to a land man, but there was nothing they could say that would make me feel worse than I did. Assuming I even heard whatever they said—I was too far up in my own mind, remembering my too-short days with Colin and how much it had hurt to swim away from him.

Alone in my chamber, I put the shell in the place that had, up until just a few days ago, been occupied by the shard from the sea witch’s house.

I traced my fingertip over its smooth edge. It wasn’t much, but it was a piece of the world I couldn’t revisit. A keepsake from the man I’d never see again.

For years, just glancing at the metal fragment had made me smile at the memory and even feel proud that I’d proven I was as brave as the next mer. I wondered if there would ever come a time when looking at this shell made me smile too, or if it would just remind me how much I missed Colin.

I touched the shell again, then turned away from it and tried to remember what it was like to feel at home in this place.

Someone pounded on the hatch. “Lir?” My brother’s voice.

Shoulders heavy, I gestured for the hatch to open.

Caspian swam in, and his voice was oddly calm and quiet as he said, “Mother and Father want to see you now.”

Avoiding his eyes, I nodded. I’d expected as much.

I didn’t argue. I didn’t say anything at all.

I just followed Caspian out of my chamber and down the corridor to face the consequences of my disappearance.

# Chapter Twenty-One

# COLIN

Joan and Haley knew the instant I came to work that something was wrong, but they'd also known me long enough not to ask questions. Not unless they wanted me to have an emotional breakdown in the back room of the lobster pound, anyway. Or out in the picnic area in front of our customers. Wouldn't that look fabulous in a Yelp review?

People were starting to trickle in for lunch, and they'd probably want to order food. So I picked up my notepad and a pen and paused to steel myself. Could I deal with people today? Well, it wasn't like I had much choice. Just run them through the specials of the day, ask what they want to drink, make sure I know who wants butter sauce, check the tables for—

"Colin." Joan appeared in front of me, concern written all over her face. Or had she been there already and I just hadn't noticed?

"Um." I muffled a cough. "Yeah?"

"Hon, we're not all that busy today." She squeezed my arm. "Why don't you call it a night?"

"I need the cash," I protested weakly. "I should—"

"You need to take care of yourself. I don't want you burning yourself or losing a finger because you're off in another world."

I winced. I *wished* I was in another world. One in particular. Christ, maybe she was right. Maybe I was too distracted and spacy to be around boiling water and sharp objects.

"Okay. Okay. You're right." With a sigh, I put my notepad on the counter. "I'll, um… I'll be back tomorrow. I guess."

"Take as much time as you need, hon."

“I can’t. I need the—”

“We’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

“But you’re—”

“Your dad fixed our boat. We can make sure you’re covered for a few days if you need it.”

I kind of felt guilty, benefitting from my dad’s out-of-character generosity, but at this point, I couldn’t really look the gift horse in the mouth. I’d be useless to Joan and Haley if I stayed at work, and I’d find a way to make it up to them once I had my head on straight again.

“Okay. Thanks.” I rolled my stiff shoulders. “I’ll try not to take too long.”

“Just take care of you, all right?”

“I will.”

On autopilot, I left the lobster pound and headed home. And of course, that was when it occurred to me that aside from the lack of cash, the one problem with being cut loose from work was that it didn’t leave me much to do except go home and wallow. Safer than wallowing around large lobster boiling pots, sure, but there weren’t a lot of distractions.

Especially, I realized as I walked into the guest house, since this was where Lir and I had spent that all-too-short time together. *Fuck*.

The bed. The hot tub. The rows of shells I’d collected from the dock, minus the scallop he’d taken with him when he’d gone. The long dock and calm water of the cove. Every inch of home reminded me of Lir, and maybe I needed to scrape together some cash and go stay somewhere else for a little while so I didn’t lose my damned mind.

I supposed I could stay up at the big house with my parents, but I didn’t imagine that would drive me any less insane. My mother undoubtedly had some *opinions* about the man she’d busted me with the other day, and—no, I definitely couldn’t handle that. Not right now.

For a long time, I stood in the kitchen and stared out at the dock, the last couple of months’ worth of visits replaying in my mind. It was weird, how up until the beginning of June, I’d had no idea Lir—or even the mer—existed. Now, as August was heading into September, my world seemed empty without him.

Because I apparently wasn’t miserable enough, I walked outside and onto the dock. It wasn’t that far from the kitchen window to there, but I irrationally convinced myself that this would bring me closer to him. He

still wouldn’t be there. I still wouldn’t see him. But I was, if only by a few dozen yards, closer.

Didn’t help. Not even a little. If anything, it just made me feel worse. Coming out here made me miss all the afternoons we’d spent talking and talking until he had to go. Going back in the house would just make me miss that tiny window of time we’d been able to touch for real.

What if I could see him again? Just one more time?

Blood pounded in my ears as I knelt on the dock and reached out. My shaking hand hovered just inches above the water. All I had to do was touch it and say his name out loud.

And…then what?

He’d said he couldn’t come back. That no one would let him leave the city after this. If I called out to him now, the best case scenario was that nothing would happen. The worst case was that he would come back, and we could torture ourselves through goodbye all over again.

A tear fell beside my hand, landing on the calm surface and releasing rings of ripples through the reflection of my hand.

Cursing softly, I pulled my hand back and sat on the dock. I wiped my eyes—not that it helped—and didn’t even know why I was bothering to pull myself together. What did I care if anyone saw me cry? Wasn’t like I was going to stop anyway.

I knew it was the right thing, but it hurt so bad that I couldn’t bring him back here. Not even for a minute. I’d sent him home because this world would never be safe for him. Calling his name and seeing him once more would just be torturing both of us, and anyway, he didn’t think he’d be able to come back, so what was the point?

I just wanted one last look at him. Maybe even one last kiss. And I was terrified that he hated me for sending him back. That after he’d left, he’d decided I was rejecting him or saying he wasn’t worth the trouble, or… anything besides the truth. I knew I’d hurt him by telling him to go back, but did he understand? Did he know I just wanted him to be safe and happy, and that I couldn’t promise him that here?

“I love you, Lir,” I said into the stillness. “If I could promise…” I choked on my own words, and wiped my eyes with a shaky hand. I couldn’t promise it, so why torture myself by saying it out loud? Yeah, I could promise him that I would love him with every fiber of my being until the end of time, but everything I’d said to him when I’d let him go still stood. I

couldn’t keep him safe. I couldn’t keep my family or even total strangers from hating him.

Letting him go was the only thing I could have done. Anything else would have been selfish and cruel.

But damn if it didn’t hurt.

*God, Lir.*

*Do you have any idea how much I miss you?*

# Chapter Twenty-Two

# LIR

Unsurprisingly, I was forbidden from leaving the palace. Not just the city, but the palace itself. Any mer—not just a son of the king and queen—would have been restricted after recklessly using sea witch magic to go on land and cavort with land people. Many before me had been through the same. It was for the protection of the mer.

So, I couldn't leave. When would I be able to leave again? I didn't care.

When I'd made the decision to go to Colin, knowing it would be my last visit to the surface, I'd thought I would feel caged in my own home and be frantically searching for an escape, but I wasn't. I'd thought I would miss the freedom to rise up and watch storms, but I didn't. In fact, I didn't want to watch another storm. All I'd ever think about was the night Colin had tumbled into the sea, and the night we'd gazed out at a storm from beneath the warmth of a sheet before retreating into his bed. Lightning would never be as powerful as it had been in that heartbeat of time when it had illuminated Colin while he'd ridden me. What was the point of watching it flash over waves and trees when I couldn't catch even a glimpse of it lighting up hypnotic dark eyes?

What was the point of leaving the palace? Or the city? Where was I going to go?

So I spent most of my time in my chamber or wandering listlessly through the palace. It had been a few days since I'd returned. I thought so, anyway. Time hadn't really mattered—it was just something to stretch like miles between now and the last time I'd been with Colin.

I should let him go and move on. There would be other lovers among the mer, and this sadness would leave me eventually, but right now, it felt

like forever. Colin was so completely and permanently gone that my grief for him reminded me of when someone had died. Especially when I considered that if something *did* happen to him—if he left Bar Harbor or if he really did die—I would never know.

"Lir?" My brother's voice made me cringe. "Lir. Please. Stop."

Stop? Was I even moving?

I turned and faced my brother in the corridor I didn't remember swimming down. "What do you want?"

He swam up closer, his brow pinched. "I'm worried about you. Ever since you returned from the surface, you've been drifting along like a jellyfish. What is the matter with you?"

I fixed a glare on him. "Do I have to explain it? Or do you just want me to so you can tell me what an idiot I am?"

Caspian eyed me, but then his expression softened. "It's the land man, isn't it?"

I flinched and looked away.

"Listen, I'm sorry I got Mother and Father involved," he said. "And I'm sorry you're hurting. I didn't do any of this to hurt you. I was worried about you. The land people are dangerous, and they—"

"And this one isn't," I snapped, voice unsteady. "This one is sweet and kind, and the only thing you've succeeded in doing is keeping me away from someone I love."

Caspian blinked, and I realized what I'd said.

My shoulders fell, "Yes, I still love him. Call me a fool if you want to. But I do."

Caspian moved in closer and touched my shoulder. "But don't you see? He sent you away. He can't possibly love—"

"That's *why* he sent me away." I jerked away from his touch. "Because he loves me."

"What? That doesn't make sense! Why would—"

"Caspian." I flipped my tail to put some space between us. "Would you just leave me in peace?"

"You haven't had peace since you returned from the surface." He swam after me. "I'm worried about you."

"Why? I'm here. I came back. What more do—"

"Lir." His shoulders sank. "Just tell me. I want to know. If the land man loves you, then why did he send you away?"

I swallowed. “Because he knows it’s dangerous for men like us up there. Not for mer—for men who love other men. The whole reason he was in danger the night of the storm was because of other men who hated him for that. They tried to kill him for it.”

Caspian’s brow quirked. “Because he loves men, they tried to kill him?”

I nodded. “The land people, they’re…” I shook my head. “I don’t understand it. I can’t begin to. Even Colin’s own parents refuse to accept it. He loves me—I know he does—but he couldn’t bear the thought of me suffering that hate and violence on land.” I swallowed, and my voice wavered as I said, “So he sent me back home where I’d be safe.”

“He sent you away…” Caspian inclined his head. “To keep you from those dangerous people?”

Fighting back my feelings, I nodded. “He said he loved me and wished I could stay, but he didn’t want me to stay where I’d be hated for loving him.” The lump in my throat didn’t want to move. “He wanted me to be someplace I could be safe, happy, and loved. And he knew he couldn’t give that to me, so he…”

Caspian stared at me.

“Are you happy now?” I barely managed to whisper. “Can I go back to my chamber?”

Mute, he nodded.

I swam away without another word and without looking back. He’d won, damn him. I was here and I wasn’t going anywhere.

What more did he want from me?

# Chapter Twenty-Three

# COLIN

I'd stayed away from the dock. I didn't look at it. Didn't go out on it. Pretty much pretended it didn't exist. I got up, had my coffee, went to work, came home, and did everything I could to distract myself from the water and anything that existed under it.

Haley and Joan had taken over emptying the lobster traps for now. I wasn't sure if that was because they were afraid of something happening to me again or if they thought I might smuggle out some scuba gear, jump overboard, and try to find the mer city. Whatever. At least I had my head together enough to do my job at the lobster pound without losing a finger or burning myself.

When I came home after a busy afternoon shift, I locked the door, tossed my wallet and keys on the table, and—

Froze.

Something felt weird. I couldn't explain it, couldn't put my finger on exactly what was different, just that something was off.

Was someone in the house?

"Mom?" I called out. I mean, seriously, who else would it be? "You in here?"

No answer.

I wandered through the guesthouse, looking for what had changed. There wasn't anyone here as far as I could see. Not my mom. Not some burglar I'd caught off guard. Not Wes Martin and his cronies. Nothing had moved or changed.

My gaze drifted to the dock outside, and the hair on my neck stood up. I didn't know why, but I wanted to be out there. I needed to be. *Right now*.

So I went out the back door and headed for the dock. And for reasons I didn't understand, I broke into a jog and hurried to the end.

A few feet shy, I realized someone was in the water. A glimpse of familiar blue-grey skin made my heart skip. "*Lir*?"

But as soon as I had a look at him, I knew this wasn't Lir. He had the same skin and the same iridescent blue fins, but his shoulders were broader and his jaw sharper. Fear sent me back a few steps. "Who are you?"

"Caspian." He watched me with an expression I couldn't begin to read. "I'm Lir's brother."

"Oh. This is unexpected." All at once, worst case scenarios began pouring into my mind. Why would his brother suddenly come see me? Had something happened? I hurried toward the edge of the dock again and dropped to my knees. "What's going on? Is Lir all right? Is he—"

"He's…" Caspian sighed. "He's well. But he's not well."

"What does that mean?"

"It means…" Caspian met my gaze again, his expression full of worry and fatigue. "He misses you."

My teeth snapped shut. "Yeah. I know the feeling."

"Is it true, then?" He tilted his head, reminding me of his brother so much it made me want to cry. "You sent him away because you love him, but it's not safe for him here?"

Face burning, I dropped my gaze and nodded. "Yeah. I… God, he must hate me, but there was no way I could ask him to stay here."

"Why?"

I swallowed, searching Caspian's eyes. "It would take me all day to explain it. Lir told me the mer don't care if men have male lovers. Land people…" I sighed. "They do care. They hate it." I shook my head. "Lir doesn't deserve that."

He watched me, as if he wasn't sure he'd heard me right.

"Listen, um…" I cleared my throat. "When you see him again, will you tell him I'm sorry I hurt him? And that I miss him? I just want him safe and happy."

Caspian was silent for another long moment. "I don't think it's my place to tell him that."

Frustration tightened my chest. "Then why—"

"I think it would be better if you told him yourself." With that, Caspian brought his hand up out of the water and offered me a vial like the ones Lir

had drunk from. “This will change you into a mer. Forever.”

I stared at it, then at him. “What?”

He set his jaw and stared right into my eyes. “My brother loves you. And you clearly love him.” He put the vial on the dock beside my knee. “Maybe that means the two of you should be together.”

“You… Really?”

Caspian nodded slowly. “If it isn’t safe for Lir in this world, then it must not be safe for you either.” He sighed with obvious resignation. “And if you’re willing to send him back to where it’s safe rather than keep him here for yourself when you so clearly want him, then I must believe that you do love him as much as you say you do.”

“I do,” I whispered.

“Then come.” He held my gaze. “Be with him.”

It took a surprising amount of restraint not to throw back the vial and dive into the water without a second thought. Leave this world behind and go be with Lir in a place where two men could love each other out in the open? Sign me the hell up.

But it did mean leaving this world and everything I’d ever known. Every*one* I’d ever known. And with as touchy as the mer could apparently be about surfacing, I didn’t imagine this deal came with weekly visitation to the people I’d left behind.

I stared down at the vial. “Do you… Do you mind if I say goodbye to someone first?”

Caspian made a *go on* gesture.

I sat back and craned my neck toward the big house. From here I could just see the highest peaks of the roof beyond the tree line.

And I was both surprised and not surprised that I wasn’t at all drawn to go up to the house and say goodbye. They couldn’t love me for who I was. They would never accept Lir if he returned in human form. They would never accept any man I loved. If they only loved pieces of me and hated others, then they didn’t really love me at all.

So why did I owe them goodbye?

Screw that.

There were, however, people who deserved better.

I pulled up Joan’s number and sent the call.

“Hey, hon. How are you doing?”

“I’m… I’m good.” Shit. My voice was shaking bad. “I just, um…”

“Are you sure? You don’t sound so good?”

“I am. I, um…” I glanced at Caspian and swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Long story short, I found a way to go be with Lir. And stay with him.”

There was a long pause. “Colin, please tell me you’re not getting ready to jump into the ocean or—”

“I’m not killing myself. There’s… It’s a really long story, but the punchline is, we found a way to be together. Just… Not here. On land.”

“Go, honey. The way you’ve been hurting without him, go to him.”

“I am. I just wanted to… You know, I didn’t want to disappear on you and Haley.”

“We appreciate that, definitely.” Her voice was shaky, which wasn’t helping me keep it together. “And you know we’ll miss you like crazy. But she and I both know what it’s like to wish we lived in a world that was kinder to people like us. So if that’s where you need to go to be happy, then more power to you, baby.”

I sniffed and wiped my eyes. “Thanks. And thank you for everything. Seriously—you’ve both been amazing friends and bosses.”

“You’re welcome.” She sniffed too. “Let me grab Haley.”

“Thanks.”

A moment later, Haley came on the line, and Joan must have given her the Cliffs Notes because she shakily said, “You’re really leaving?”

“Yeah. I’m… I’m going to join the mer. So I can be with Lir.”

“Oh, that’s amazing! You’re going to be so happy there, Colin.”

“Yeah, I think I am. But I wanted to say goodbye first.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” God, she sounded even less composed than Joan had. “And I really, really hope you two are happy together.”

I smiled despite the sting in my eyes. “Yeah. Me too. You two take care, okay? Be nice to whoever replaces me at the lobster pound.”

She laughed, and there were definitely tears now. “We can’t replace you.”

I wiped away my own tears. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. And we’ll be nice to them. I promise.”

“Good.” I glanced at Caspian, who was still patiently waiting beside the dock. “Listen, I, um. I better go. I love you both.”

“We love you, too.” She sniffled. “Go be with your man.”

“Will do.”

After we'd ended the call, I needed a moment to collect my composure. Once I'd more or less pulled myself together, I stared at my phone. Beyond Joan and Haley, there wasn't anyone I could call who'd understand. And the mer probably didn't need me lighting up the phone lines telling people, *"Hey, guess who actually exists?"*

I didn't feel all that compelled to say goodbye to anyone else. That probably said a lot about the depressing existence I'd been leading here.

So, I turned off my phone and set it down on the dock. "Okay. I think I'm ready."

Caspian nodded. "All right."

"I should, um…" Lir had gone into the water before he'd drunk the potion, hadn't he? That water would be cold as hell, but hopefully not for long. Heart going a million miles an hour, I stripped off my clothes and didn't bother dipping my toes in before I just jumped.

"Holy shit!" I yelped as I resurfaced, icy water enveloping my naked skin. "Fuck, that's cold!"

Caspian eyed me. "Are you all right?"

"Y-yeah," I said through chattering teeth. "Just…not built for cold water." I grabbed the vial off the dock. "Yet."

I didn't let myself dwell on how much this change might hurt or anything else, and I swallowed the potion like a shot. It was bitter and acidic, burning the back of my throat like bile, and—

Suddenly everything felt…weird. My body felt like everything was rearranging itself, especially from my pelvis down, and maybe it was. My skin burned. Everything tingled. Then fire ripped across my sides, and I gasped, which pulled cold water in through the newly opened gills. I had a few seconds to panic, thinking I was about to drown from the rush of water, but… I didn't.

It seemed like it took hours, or maybe even days, but it couldn't have been more than a minute or two. Hadn't it been about that long for Lir? Whatever. When it was over and my mind and vision started to clear, I realized I wasn't cold anymore. My sides were tender where the gills had opened up, but my lower body… It didn't hurt, but it definitely felt weird. I looked down. My skin was no longer lightly tanned Caucasian, but storm-cloud gray like Lir's and Caspian's.

And beneath the surface, starting just above my hipbones, my skin became scaled like a fish, gleaming silver instead of blue like the other two

mer I’d met. Fins of the same color extended from behind my arms, and I was pretty sure I felt one tugging at my back every time I moved. There was some webbing between my fingers, too.

I craned my neck a little to check out my gills. I experimentally inhaled, and…using gills turned out to be surprisingly easy. As if my body figured out what to do before my brain caught up. Then I realized I didn’t actually have to inhale or exhale—the gills did the work.

Which meant now I could breathe underwater.

I started to lower myself, and as the surface climbed my neck, I had to fight the instinctive urge to take a deep breath. Closing my eyes again, I let myself submerge completely.

I wasn’t breathing through my mouth or nose, but I didn’t feel like I was holding my breath. Water moved through the gills, and there was no urge to lift my head above the water and take a breath.

Yep. I was breathing.

I was breathing underwater.

Through gills.

“Open your eyes.” Caspian’s voice sounded clear, as if we were speaking above water. Hadn’t Lir’s sounded that way during the storm?

Cringing against the burn of salt, I opened my eyes.

I blinked a few times, but the burn didn’t come. And nothing was blurry, either. Caspian’s face was as clear as his voice had sounded. As in-focus as Lir’s had been the night I’d met him. If not for the way his hair and fins moved in the gentle current, it would’ve been hard to believe we were underwater at all.

I opened my mouth to say something, but the rush of saltwater across my tongue and into my throat made me gag. I surfaced, coughed a few times, and spat water.

Beside me, Caspian rose. “It’ll take you time to learn to speak. But it’ll come to you.”

I coughed again. “Are you sure?”

He nodded. “The gills breathe for you. It’s only a matter of learning to let water pass into your throat without choking.”

“Huh. Who knew a well-trained gag reflex would come in handy like this?”

He eyed me.

“Uh.” I cleared my throat. “Never mind. But you’re sure?”

“That’s what the sea witch told me.”

“And…we can trust her?”

“The potion made you mer, didn’t it?”

“Good point. Okay, let’s…” I hesitated, then sank beneath the surface again.

“Get used to your tail and fins,” Caspian said. “Then I’ll take you to Lir.”

Lir. God, yes.

I nodded and experimentally started swimming around beneath the water. I appreciated that he’d given me some time—he must have known there was a learning curve to this. The tail and tailfins were strange, and my sides still hurt from the stupid gills, but I managed. The fins on my arms and back were weird—moving them even slightly made my whole body change course. It was going to take a while to figure out exactly how to use those.

Little by little, though, I got the hang of moving around. Maybe I wasn’t exactly graceful yet, and I was probably slow as hell, but I felt like I was at the level of a kid with a learner’s permit who could stay between the lines even if he wasn’t quite ready for the interstate.

As I came back toward him, Caspian met my eyes. “Are you ready?”

I nodded. I still couldn’t speak, but I had no doubt he saw the words plain as day on my face:

*Please take me to Lir*.

# Chapter Twenty-Four

# LIR

Day by day, I'd only grown more listless.

I couldn't return to the surface, and I'd be torturing myself if I did. Being with Colin at the water's edge would be better than not having him at all, but at the same time, it would just make me ache to be close to him again.

But I'd never make it to the surface. My parents' guards were watching me as closely as my own siblings, and I'd be lucky to make it out of the palace. If I could muster the energy to swim with the speed that had always kept me ahead of my brother and sisters—and that was doubtful these days—I would only be kept under heavier guard once I returned.

At least Caspian had finally let me be. I'd barely seen him the last couple of days, and not at all today. Maybe after our last conversation, he'd finally accepted that I wasn't going to try to surface again.

I'd been in one of the upper towers helping my sisters repair a couple of windows that had been damaged by some debris. That had given me something to do for a while, which I appreciated. Now that we were done, I wandered out of the palace in search of the next diversion.

My parents had become concerned with me swimming around the palace, and they'd urged me to go out and be with other mer. They'd reassured me that plenty of mer were keeping an eye in me in case I tried to leave the city, but they'd agreed that spending some time out in the open water would do me better than keeping me here. I had a feeling they knew as well as I did that surfacing wouldn't even cross my mind. Otherwise, they'd have kept me restricted to the palace longer, just to be safe.

So I swam out. And it was nice, being out in the sea again. I still felt anchored down by how much I missed Colin, but swimming somewhere other than through tight corridors and cramped chambers was a pleasant switch. Maybe I'd go down to the shipwreck and—

"Lir?" Caspian's voice set my teeth on edge. Gods, they hadn't told him I was allowed to leave the palace, had they? Now he was going to try to haul me back in.

I didn't even have the energy to roll my eyes, and I also didn't fight back the frustration in my voice as I started to turn. "Can't you just leave me in—"

I froze. My brother seemed to vanish altogether, and the entire ocean was suddenly empty of everyone but me and…

And *him*.

Somehow I choked out, "*Colin*?"

The mer beside Caspian nodded.

"But… but… *How?*"

Colin opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated, cutting his eyes toward Caspian.

My brother cleared his throat. "Learning to speak takes time."

"So he's not mute? The way I was on land?"

Caspian shook his head. "No. He just needs time."

I faced Colin again, and disbelief rendered *me* mute for a moment.

There was no question—this was definitely Colin, but he was also absolutely mer. His skin had changed from sun-kissed pink to something closer to mine, and his legs had become a long, silver tail, the same color as the fins along his arms and probably his back. Down his sides were gills, and he watched me with dark eyes that seemed to truly see, rather than being irritated by the water. The dark spots he'd had across his nose and cheekbones had been adorable, and I was sad to see that they hadn't stayed when he'd changed into a mer, but whatever faint disappointment I had over that paled in comparison to the relief that he was here. That he was mer.

I swam a little closer, my head spinning and my mind reeling. When I was near enough, I reached for him, hesitated, then touched his face, and he pressed into my hand. "Is that really you?"

Smiling, he nodded, and when his fingertips brushed my cheek, I shivered. It was him. It had to be. He was fully mer but still Colin from head to tailfin. And he was *here*.

As much as I didn’t want to look away from Colin, I turned to Caspian. “Why have you done this?”

My brother glanced at Colin, then faced me and smiled. “When you told me why he sent you back to the sea—that he wanted you to stay but couldn’t subject you to the inevitable misery up there—it made me realize he must truly love you. That if having you meant you’d be unhappy or unsafe, then he’d rather lose you.” Caspian shook his head. “I can’t think of a man more deserving of my brother’s love than one who’d sacrifice his own happiness to save yours.”

I was nearly as speechless as Colin right then. For the first time in a long time, I embraced my brother fiercely, and I managed to whisper, “Thank you, Caspian.”

“You’re welcome.” He patted my back. “You know I only wanted you to be happy. And safe. Right?”

I nodded. “I know. I’ve always known that.” As I drew back, I laughed halfheartedly. “You just stubbornly refused to accept that I might find that happiness someplace else.”

“If it were anyone else…” Chuckling he shook his head. “I should have known you’d find love in the last place any mer should be looking.”

I laughed as I slipped my hand into Colin’s but sobered as the reality of everything sank in. “Except… How did you…” I gestured at Colin with my free hand.

“The same way you did,” Caspian said. “I went to the sea witch.”

I tensed. “What was her price?”

He smiled, though the expression was a little sad. “The stone I took from her trench when I was a boy.”

“But…you treasured that stone.”

“And you treasured the piece you took too.” He motioned toward Colin. “But returning it was worth it to be with him, wasn’t it?”

I nodded.

“Returning my stone was worth it to see the light return to my brother’s eyes.” He squeezed my arm. “There will be other stones. There is no other you.” He turned to Colin and touched his shoulder. “And, evidently, no other *you*.”

Colin just smiled, but his face reflected all the gratitude he couldn’t say out loud.

“I’ll leave you two to get reacquainted.” Caspian motioned toward the palace. “And, um, explain it to Mother and Father.”

I grimaced. “We’ll join you. Just…give us a moment.”

“Of course.” Caspian smiled, and then he swam away.

Once we were alone, I faced Colin again. “It’s so good to see you, but… Are you sure about this? Never going back?”

He was nodding before I’d finished speaking, and he brought my hand up to press a kiss to my fingers.

“But you’re giving up your whole world. Your family. All right, I know your family is difficult, but they—”

His lips silenced mine.

I swore, the sea itself stilled around us as we pulled each other close and sank into a kiss I thought I’d never know again. Everything seemed silent and unmoving. His lips weren’t soft the way they’d been in his land person form, but they were soft in the way a mer’s would be. They were still sweet, still gentle, still everything I’d been missing since I’d slipped back into the sea.

*You’re here. Everything is right.*

Drawing back, I looked in his eyes. “I never would have asked you to choose,” I whispered. “Just so you know. I’ve missed you so badly, but I would never… I couldn’t.”

*I know,* he mouthed. He touched my face as he silently added, *I love you*.

“I love you too.” I curved a hand behind his neck and drew him in for another kiss. Then I grinned. “I guess now you get to find out how coupling happens between two mer.”

Colin’s eyebrows rose, and then he grinned too as he nodded.

I laughed. “We’ll get there. First, do you want to see where we’ll be living?”

He nodded again.

I took his hand and was about to start swimming, but paused. “I, um, I suppose now you should know something about me.”

Colin tilted his head.

“We…won’t be living in amongst the rest of the mer.” I gestured at the palace. “We’ll be living there.”

He followed my gesture, and his eyes widened. Pointing at the palace, he looked at me again, and mouthed, *There?*

“Yes. My parents, they’re… Well, they’re the king and queen.”

He blinked.

“I didn’t tell you before because sometimes it’s nice to just be Lir, not a prince. But it seems only fair to tell you now.”

He still looked shocked, and he laughed as he shook his head. Then he cupped my face, drew me in, and kissed me in a way that said nothing had changed. He was still Colin. I was still Lir. We were together. The rest? Didn’t make a bit of difference.

It would take time for Colin to learn to speak beneath the water, and it would probably take even longer for me to get used to the fact that he was here. That, when given the choice between his world and me, he’d chosen me.

I had no doubt that would be a lot to live up to. He’d left behind everyone and everything he’d ever known to be with me, and I wanted that decision to be worth it for him.

So I intended to use the rest of my days trying my best to do just that.

# EPILOGUE

## Colin

*Colin.*

I didn't hear the voice, per se. I felt it. Or had I imagined it?

No. No, it was definitely real. I'd been swimming beside Lir, following a familiar array of rocks toward some caves we'd been exploring, when the sense of my name had washed over me.

Lir swam back and touched my arm. "What's wrong?"

I lifted my gaze toward the surface high over our heads. "I think… I think someone is calling to me."

"Did you hear your name?"

"Yeah, I think so. Didn't really hear it, but…"

He nodded. "Someone's calling to you." He searched my eyes. "Do you want to go to them?"

I thought about the voice I'd felt rather than heard, and I was sure somehow that it was Joan. If there was anyone on land I wanted to see, it was her and Haley. "Yes. I do. How do I find her?"

"Just go toward the sound."

I quirked a brow.

He smiled. "Trust me. Start swimming. You'll know where to go."

I was dubious, but I was already learning about some of those weird extra senses the mer had—reading fish body language and feeling weather changes from a hundred feet down—so I did as I was told. Lir fell in beside me, and somehow… Somehow I knew to head slightly north.

I was nervous and excited about returning to the surface for the first time in weeks. I'd been so caught up in getting used to my new life down here that I hadn't really felt drawn to return. There were things I missed

about my own world, of course, and every day was an exercise in culture shock, but it was all worth it every time I could wrap an arm around Lir or steal an affectionate kiss with others around.

And the new body had a learning curve too, especially as I'd figured out how to use all the various fins, but it was kind of fun. So was learning how two merdudes fucked. I'd gotten the hang of that too, but Lir didn't seem to mind me wanting to "practice" as often as possible.

It had taken a little time to learn to talk underwater, mostly because I had to get past the instinctive resistance to water going into my throat. I could talk now, though, much to Caspian's chagrin—his brother and I wouldn't shut up for anything.

Lir's family hadn't been sure about me at first, but Caspian had convinced them to give me a chance. Little by little, they were warming up to me, and there was a good chance that soon, I would be officially married into the royal family. That was seriously weird. I went from a family who thought they were royalty and lorded over everyone to an actual, honest to God, crown-wearing palace-dwelling royal fucking family who basically saw themselves as mer supervisors—they were just like all the other mer but had the responsibility of making sure everything in the city ran smoothly. My parents could learn a thing or two about humility from the literal king and queen who were my soon-to-be in-laws.

As Lir and I continued following the sound of my name, I started seeing more and more lobster traps along the sea floor and more boat hulls bobbing on the surface. I had a feeling that meant we were getting into Bar Harbor, especially when a huge catamaran went by, probably for a whale-watching tour.

We continued past the busiest part of the harbor and came to a dock with a single hull beside it.

"This is the boat you were on." Lir pointed at the runes just below the waterline. "When I met you."

"We must be in the right place, then."

Lir stopped, so I did too, and he met my eyes. "Do you want me to stay below?"

"No." I slipped my hand into his. "I want you to meet her anyway." I paused. "If you want to, I mean."

"Of course." He moved in close and kissed me softly. "Shall we?"

My heart sped up. "Definitely."

With Lir beside me, I broke the surface, and the bright light was blinding for a couple of seconds.

Then my vision cleared, and sure enough—there was Joan.

She blinked. “Wow. I…” She shook herself. “It’s funny—I knew you’d changed, but seeing is definitely believing.”

I chuckled. “Yeah?” Spreading my arms, I grinned. “So what do you think?”

“It suits you.” She glanced at Lir, and her smile broadened. “Being happy and in love, especially.”

I wasn’t sure if I was blushing—or if mer were even capable of it—but if I’d still been a land person? Oh. I totally would’ve been.

Joan sobered and crouched on the edge of the dock. “Listen, I know you probably can’t stay up here long. The reason I called out to you is your parents and your siblings haven’t taken it well.” She grimaced. “I didn’t want to give away that merfolk exist, but… I mean, I need to tell them something besides letting them believe you’ve drowned or disappeared.”

I swallowed. “Maybe I should actually come see them. So they can see for themselves that I’m alive.”

Lir stiffened. So did Joan.

“Are you serious?” she asked.

I thought about it for a moment. When I glanced at Lir, his brow was pinched, but he shrugged as if to say *your call*. Meeting Joan’s eyes again, I said, “Have them take you out onto the dock behind the guesthouse. Then call to me.”

She nodded. “All right. It might take a little while. Your brother and sister want to see you too.”

“Okay. We’re not far away. Just, you know, give us a chance to get to you.”

“Will do. In the meantime, take care, okay?”

“Always do.”

We exchanged a quick hug, and she didn’t seem to mind her T-shirt getting wet in the process. Wasn’t like we could avoid it.

Then Lir and I went back into the water and swam toward home.

A hundred yards or so from the shore, he stopped, and when I did, he put a hand on my chest and looked in my eyes. “Are you sure it’s safe? Letting them know the mer exist?”

I nodded, cupping his face. “They’re assholes, but they’re not out to hurt anyone, and they care too much about their reputation. Dad’s embarrassed enough by me being gay, and my guess is he’d rather people think I’m dead than admit out loud that he believes in merfolk.”

Lir’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Unfortunately, yeah. So I think we’re safe as long as no one keeps us from leaving the city.”

He pursed his lips. “We’ll talk to Mother and Father. Under the circumstances, they’ll let us go, as long as we’re cautious. I hope.”

I took his hand and squeezed it gently. “Let’s hope.”

---

It was several days before I heard Joan’s voice again. Just as well—it took almost that long to persuade Lir’s parents and siblings that we had a good reason to surface again. Caspian and Cascade followed us partway but hung back outside the cove.

Caspian frowned at us. “Be careful.”

“We will,” Lir said.

“We won’t be long,” I added, and we swam into the cove.

Pretending my stomach wasn’t somersaulting and my heart wasn’t pounding, I surfaced with Lir beside me.

When my eyes adjusted, there were several people on the dock: My parents, both of my siblings, and Joan and Haley.

My mom gasped and put a hand to her mouth. “*Colin*?”

I forced a smile. “Hi, Mom.”

“You’re… How is…”

Dad stared at me with wide eyes. “How in the world…?”

“I’m mer.”

“But *how* did—”

“Why, Colin?” Mom demanded. “How could you do this?” She didn’t add “to me” to the end of that, but I heard it well enough.

I wrapped my arm around Lir’s shoulders, and he rested his hand on my chest. “It was the only way I could be with him.”

Her mouth opened and closed. Like a fish, ironically.

“Listen,” I said. “We can’t be here long. I came up because you deserve the courtesy of a proper goodbye instead of worrying that I’m dead. All I’m asking in return is that you don’t tell anyone about us.” I gestured at myself and Lir and looked pointedly at my father. “That we even exist.”

Dad huffed indignantly. “Do you honestly think I’d stain my reputation by telling people I believe in fairy tales?”

Damn. Called it.

To my surprise, though, before I could respond, Dad sighed and added, “And whether I approve of what you are or what you’ve become, you are my son.” He shook his head. “I won’t put you in danger.” He shot pointed looks at everyone else on the dock. “None of us will.”

There were nods all around.

“Thank you,” I said.

My mom glanced back and forth between Dad and me, then balled her fists at her sides. “You’re just going to let this happen, then? You’re going to *let* our son—”

“Does it look like I can stop him?” Dad sounded bored now. Or maybe tired. Drained, even. It was hard to say. “This is what he wants.”

“But… Jonathan, he’s *leaving* us. He’s leaving everything behind, and…” She turned her glare on me. “For God’s sake, Colin. I took care of you, even after most parents would have said you were out on your own, and this…” She gestured wildly at me. “*This* is what you’re going to do? Abandon your family to go live as a gay fish?”

“Well, when you put it like that?” I shrugged. “Yeah, pretty much.”

She glared down at us, but the anger quickly dissipated into hurt. “Colin…”

“Mom.” I sighed. “Look, I’m not saying you weren’t a devoted mom, or that you didn’t love me. But you didn’t accept me. You and Dad have made it clear you’ll never accept who I am. Which means… Honestly? It means you don’t really love me.”

My dad winced, but he didn’t try to correct me.

“What? Of course we do!” Mom looked at him as if for confirmation, though his expression didn’t change. Turning to me again, she said, “Your father and I love you, Colin. How can you say these things?”

“Because you don’t love me. ” I kept my voice as calm as I could even though I was dying inside. “You love who you wanted me to be.”

“That is…” Her lips pulled tight as she glared at me.

Then, without another word, Mom stalked away, heels thunking hard on the dock. Dad glanced at me, then followed her. I watched them go, a lump in my throat as I realized this could very well be the last time I ever saw my parents. That was hard to swallow, but it was also kind of a relief after they'd shown their true colors. At the end of the day, Mom's biggest concern was that people knew she was a good mother, not that she actually was one, and Dad's biggest concern was the family's reputation. Leaving them like this—not just flying the nest like my siblings before me but truly leaving so I could be who they didn't want me to be—was an affront and an insult.

I supposed that told me everything I needed to know about my parents. And if I'd worried that becoming mer had been a short-sighted and reckless decision, I definitely didn't anymore. Not when the mer accepted me more than my own parents ever would.

As Mom and Dad's footsteps faded, I turned to the small crowd remaining on the dock.

My sister, Danielle, knelt on the edge. "Am I ever going to see you again?"

"If you want to, yeah." I nodded toward Joan. "Same way she did—just touch the water and say my name."

She nodded, blinking back some tears. "You're happy down there, though, right?"

"Yeah." I glanced at Lir, and my heart quickened. As I looked up at my sister again, I said, "I've never been happier."

"Good. Just, you know, keep an ear to the… the waves, I guess? I'd like to see you again."

"Deal." I pushed myself up a little, and we exchanged a damp hug.

As she let me go, she turned to Lir. "Take care of my brother, okay?"

Lir smiled up at her. "I will. You have my word."

"Thank you." She rose and stepped back while I said goodbye to my brother. He and I had never been particularly close, but there was still some finality to this that was harder to swallow than I'd anticipated. In that moment, I regretted that my siblings and I had always been more focused on getting out of our parents' house than on banding together and leaning on each other.

As I let him go, I said, "Same for goes for you, you know. You want to see me…"

He nodded, swallowing like it was harder than it should've been. "Yeah. I'll remember. So don't go swimming off to the Med or something, you know?"

I laughed. "Nah. I won't be that far away."

"Good." He squeezed my arm. "I'll see you again, then."

"Definitely."

He gave another sharp nod, and then stood.

Saying goodbye to my siblings was hard. One look at Joan and Haley, though, almost broke me.

Haley crouched on the edge of the dock, fighting a losing battle against tears. "I always knew you'd find happiness somewhere other than Bar Harbor. I just thought we'd, you know, still be friends on Facebook or something."

I laughed as I reached up to hug her. "I'm not really that far away. You know how to find me."

"I know." She squeezed me tight. "It won't be the same, though."

"Well, just…" I released her and met her eyes, pretending the tear sliding down her cheek wasn't breaking my heart. "Print out the good memes and bring them when you call me."

She laughed and wiped her eyes. "Deal. Or I'll just, you know, show them to you on my phone."

"That works too."

Haley hugged me again. "I'm gonna miss you."

"Me too."

After she let me go, it was Joan's turn. She leaned down, and I pushed myself up enough on one elbow to sling my other arm around her. We hugged, and she said, "We already miss you like crazy, but we're so glad you're happy."

"Thanks. And like I told Haley—I'm really not that far away."

"I know." She patted the back of my head, and as we separated, she sniffed. "Just don't be a stranger." She gave Lir a pointed look. "That goes for both of you."

He laughed softly, and nodded.

I wrapped an arm around him again. "We should go. They really don't like us being at the surface for very long."

Joan wiped her eyes. "Okay. We'll try not to call you up here that much, but I do want to see you both sometimes at least."

“Definitely.”

We exchanged one more hug, and then Lir and I dove back under and headed out of the cove. It was strange, swimming out of here and being fully at ease in this body. The first time, when Caspian had patiently waited for me to figure out fins and tail, I’d wondered if I’d ever feel normal as a mer.

But now I did. I was, for the first time in my life, both comfortable in my own skin and in the world I was living in. No more hiding who I was. No more wondering if someone would hate me just for being me. I had freedom that I’d never imagined even existed, and could be openly in love with another man among people who didn’t see any reason to look askance at us.

There would always be a part of me that missed the world I’d left behind, but that wasn’t a world where I could truly and safely be me. This place, where I could be who I was and love who I loved, was where I belonged.

I finally was, and forever would be, home.

*The End*

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.A. Witt and her husband have been exiled from Spain and sent to live in Maine because rhymes are fun. She now divides her time between writing, assuring people she is aware that Maine is cold, wondering where to put her next tattoo, and trying to reason with a surly Maine coon. Rumor has it her arch nemesis, Lauren Gallagher, is also somewhere in the wilds of New England, which is why L.A. is also spending a portion of her time training a team of spec ops lobsters. Authors Ann Gallagher and Lori A. Witt have been asked to assist in lobster training, but they "have books to write" and "need to focus on our careers" and "don't you think this rivalry has gotten a little out of hand?" They're probably just helping Lauren raise her army of squirrels trained to ride moose into battle.

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